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# **LINEAMENTA FOR THE ASIAN SYNOD AND FABC STATEMENTS**

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Edited by  
**Kuncheria Pathil**

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# jeevadhara

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

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## Lineamenta for the Asian Synod and FABC Statements

Edited by

**Kuncheria Pathil**

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## Editorial

The Synod of Bishops for Asia is going to be held in Rome in 1998. The *Lineamenta* which is a broad outline of the theme, prepared in view of the Synod, is now being circulated inviting suggestions and comments. In the light of the responses to the *Lineamenta* and to the questions attached to it, the Synod Secretariat will prepare the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which will be the Working Document of the Synod. It is this latter document which will be discussed and approved by the Synod. We thought that at this stage of the preparations of the Asian Synod it might be opportune and useful that *Jeevadhara* publish a Special Number on the *Lineamenta* to stimulate a widespread discussion and help the process of common thinking in the Church in Asia.

Some years ago Walbert Buehlmann in his book, *Coming of the Third Church*, analyzed the history of the Church and convincingly argued out that in the Third Millennium the Asian and African Churches will emerge as a major force in Christianity. In the First Millennium of the history of the Church the Eastern Churches played the decisive role: The leaders of the Church both among Bishops and theologians were from the Eastern Churches; all the Ecumenical Councils were held in the East and the major decisions both doctrinal and disciplinary came from the East. But in the Second Millennium the Western Churches emerged as the dominant force in the Church. It was the period of the emergence and consolidation of the Papacy which dominated the Churches both in the West and in the East. In this period Western Theology and its formulations became rather the norm for all the Churches. But today Western Christianity appears to be on the decline, and there are clear signs that in the Third Millennium the Churches of Asia and Africa will emerge as the dominant force in the Universal Church.

This analysis seems to be correct in its broad outline. It means quite a lot of responsibility for the Asian Churches when they enter into the third millennium. Will the Asian Churches rise to this occasion? Could the Asian Synod give a momentum to the Asian Churches for their new role of initiative and leadership? Will the Synod be really *Asian*?

The *Lineamenta* is widely criticized for lack of Asian theological perspectives. It misses the emphasis and insights of Asian Christians as reflected in the Statements and several other documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). The articles of this Number of *Jeevadhara* are designed to draw out from the FABC Statements some of the relevant themes and ideas pertaining to the mission of the Church in Asia, and thus to complement the *Lineamenta*. The thinking and contributions of the FABC have to be the starting point for the discussions of the Asian Synod. Asian Churches shall not be dictated by the thinking of the Western Churches. If the Synod is going to be organized, conducted, and dominated predominantly by the Roman bureaucrats, it will be a disaster for the Asian Churches.

At present many of the Asian Churches have a foreign face; they are the replica of Western Churches whether they are Catholic or Protestant. Western Christian models are neither very much relevant nor appealing to the Asian people. One of the important theological thrusts made by the FABC is its call for a triple immersion of the Asian Churches into the life of Asia's poor, into Asia's vibrant cultures, and into Asia's living and fertile religious traditions. If this triple immersion takes place, Asian Churches will emerge with vitality, newness and originality.

In Asia the Church is a tiny minority living side by side with the majority of people who belong to other living faiths which play a major role in the Asian society. Christians in Asia have to live and work with people of all other faiths and enter into a healthy and intimate relationship with them. Any aggressive missionary style on the colonial model will be irrelevant to Asia and resisted by the Asian people. The path for the Asian Churches will be a common pilgrimage with the people of all religions and ideologies with the strong common commitment for a new Asian society based on the authentic human and spiritual values. In the creation of this new society the Church has a definitive role to play as the Church is called to witness to Jesus Christ who is God's gift to the whole humanity. The Church's mission in Asia is indeed that of love and service along the path of Jesus Christ.

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# Lineamenta for the Asian Synod

Starting from the rationale of the Asian Synod and its special relevance to India, the writer passes on to the contents of "Lineamenta" by giving a summary of it.

The mission of the Church is to be the sacrament of Christ, the risen Lord in the world. She has to do this till the end of history and to the limits of the world. She has to meet the peoples of this world as Jesus did when he walked through Palestine proclaiming the Good News. In the fulfillment of this mission she has to take into account the human reality with its diversity, its cultural and religious pluralism. She has to do this believing that the Spirit of God has been operative in this world from the very moment of creation.

At the dawn of the third millennium, the Vatican Council has made the Church conscious of her mission as evangelizer in a special way. She is passing through a special period in the fulfillment of the task assigned to her by Christ. One of the realities of which she has become aware today is the fact that there is a great awakening among the peoples of the world with regard to their identity and originality. The mission of evangelization, therefore, has to take into account today, more than ever, of the pluralism of our modern world. The technological progress, especially the media revolution, has made the people come nearer to one another. The Church has to communicate the Good News in a way in which it really becomes the Good News to all.

Asia is a continent that is characterized in a special way by pluralism. Although the Gospel first appeared on the Asian soil, the impact that this great event has made on the great masses of this continent is very negligible. Perhaps we have not presented the Gospel to the peoples of Asia in a way in which it has become the Good News for them. This is the rationale behind the convocation of the special Synod for Asia.

The theme of the Synod truly expresses the real meaning of evangelization: *Jesus Christ the savior and His mission of love and service in Asia — that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* God sent His Son into the world for only one purpose: to give life to the world, a life that nothing can destroy. This is what we call the Kingdom of God. In fact from the very beginning of the Gospel, it is very clear that the preaching of the word by Jesus was to bring about total healing and well being to all by opposing and removing everything that prevents the human being from experiencing the love of God.

This Synod is specially relevant to the Church in India. Although Christianity has been existing in this subcontinent from the very beginning through the ministry of two Apostles: Thomas and Bartholomew, the Gospel did not make that impact which it ought to have made on the people of this land ... Perhaps the vitality of the Gospel was lost because it got caught up in the caste system that prevailed in this land. Then we have the next period of evangelization: the missionary movement of the Colonial period. Although, it was carried out with zeal and sacrifice by the many missionaries that came from Europe, by and large, it resulted only in the establishment of Christian pockets with a minority complex in the midst of the great population belonging to other faiths. The Church in India did not understand itself as an evangelizing Church. That is a great lacuna in her identity. With Vatican II, a Council that has given to the Church a renewed identity as a community called to evangelize the world, the Church in India, too, is called to a new awareness of her identity. That can be nothing else but of an evangelizing community. There are many signs that clearly proclaim this call from the Lord. The great increase in the indigenous vocations, the existence of local leadership in the Church etc., indicate the fact that the Christian community in India is called to a new spring and the characteristic of this renewed vitality can be nothing but an evangelizing thrust. Therefore, the Synod, with its call to proclaim the Good News of life for all and that too in abundance is a special kairos for the Church in India.

### Contents of the Lineamenta

The purpose of the Lineamenta published by the committee that prepares the Synod is to get ready the agenda to be discussed



in the Council. This document contains 6 chapters that explain the context in which the convocation of the Synod has taken place as well as the main issues that the Asian Church faces with regard to the fulfillment of her mission of evangelization. At the end of these chapters, there are 14 questions which the various Episcopal conferences are expected to answer. The agenda of the Synod which will be called *Instrumentum Laboris* will be prepared taking into account these answers. This document will be sent to all the members of the Synod who will be the representatives of the Episcopal Conferences of Asia. We shall now present here a brief summary of the main ideas contained in the six chapters of the Lineamenta.

## 1. Asian Realities

The geographical area that will be represented at the Synod is a vast land mass. Geographically it extends from the Ural mountains to the Pacific ocean and is made up of the following regions: Middle East, the Gulf Countries, South Asian Countries, Central Asian countries, South East Asian countries, Asian Siberia and the countries of the Far East. As is evident, we have here a variety of geographical situations that vary from the extreme cold areas of the Polar regions to the very hot climate of the tropics.

Asia is also a continent of great religious and cultural pluralism. Almost all the religions, including Christianity, have their origin in Asia. The millennial cultures of Asia are the rich heritage of humanity. They have influenced the lives of the peoples of the world in very many ways. One of the characteristics of the Asian cultures is that they have been very much influenced by religion and spirituality. Even today, these factors are very much alive and play a determining role in the lives of the peoples.

In spite of the diversity of cultures and religions, we notice today an awakening of the Asian awareness. This is expressed in the cultural and religious revival among the people, even though they are very much under the impact of the technological and media culture of the West.

The picture of modern Asia will not be complete unless we also take into account the socio-economic and political situation

of this continent. Although Asia is a continent of religiosity and spirituality, we can notice here religious fanaticism bordering on unjust discrimination and persecution, existing together with great tolerance in the practice of religion. Similarly in the field of economic progress, we find in Asia some of the most progressed countries as well as some of the poorest nations of the world. In the field of politics, there are democracies that respect the freedom of the people existing together with some of the most oppressive autocratic regimes. It is into this world that Jesus sends his disciples today to proclaim the Good News. Asia needs life that can be experienced as the love of the Father in terms of a community of brotherhood. The immense natural resources and spiritual riches which the Creator of the world has bestowed on this continent must become the source of life for all the people that inhabit it. This is the Good news of life that Jesus wants to communicate to Asia.

## 2. Evangelization in Asia

The Gospel made its first appearance on the soil of Asia. As we have already mentioned above, almost immediately after Pentecost, the Gospel was preached in Asia by the very Apostles of Jesus Himself in India. But this evangelizing mission of the Church in Asia continued almost through the centuries until today. The Syrian Church spread the Gospel in China in the VII century. The Franciscans preached the Good News also in China in the 13th century. The 15th century saw the great missionary movements that followed the discovery of trade routes to India. There are flourishing Christian communities in the East and the West coasts of India as well as in the Philippines as a result of the missionary efforts. The case of the Korean Church need to be mentioned in a special way, because it was a Church that came into existence as a result of the evangelizing activity of the laity. In the 18th century, we see for the first time women religious venture into the mission field. The 20th century has witnessed another phenomenon which augurs well for the Church in Asia. There is not only a growth in the indigenous vocations, but there is also a vitality in the Church that is expressed in the efforts to build up an indigenous theology and liturgy. Besides, we also see during this century the rise of Asian missionary institutes. In spite of all these positive efforts towards evangelization in Asia,

we have to admit that there have been certain methods and approaches in the mission work which have at times created a negative image of the Church in this continent. One of them has been the approaches to cultures and religions; the other is that, by and large our Christian communities are ghettos with minority complex; they lack missionary thrust. The Synod, I believe, is an invitation to create in the Christian communities of Asia a deeper sense of mission.

### **3. God's salvific mission in history**

There is only one plan of salvation for the whole human kind. God has manifested it in creation. He is the source of all life and the fullness of life can be found nowhere else except in him. It is within this universal plan of salvation that we have to situate the mission of the Church. The Church is not sent into a God-forsaken world. The spirit of God has been active in Asia for millennia. The religiosity and the spiritual aspirations of the people bear witness to it. The mission of Jesus Christ is to bring this work of the Spirit to its fulfillment. His death and resurrection is the affirmation of the fullness of life, a life without death. The Gospel proclaims this life to all. That is what we call the Kingdom of God. The Church is sent into the world in order to be the messenger and sign of this Kingdom.

### **4. Jesus Christ, God's Good news of Salvation to all**

In the person of Jesus, the ideal man according to the plan of God has appeared; he conquered death which is the real enemy of life. His whole life was a battle against all the forces of death. Our faith in Jesus Christ is an affirmation of the fullness of life that has appeared in Jesus Christ. When we say that Jesus is the one and the only Saviour, we are not excluding all the other forms of mediation that have existed in the course of human history. Jesus did not come to destroy anything that is good and salvific. His mission is to fulfill all the aspirations for genuine life that are in the hearts of human persons. He, therefore, perfects what has already been happening under the impulse of the Spirit in humanity. When we evangelize, we are not simply communicating a truth, but we are sharing our faith in Jesus who died and rose from the dead and thus offer to humanity the fullness of life.



The Church is called to proclaim this Good News to all in Asia. In the fulfillment of this mission she has to enter into the human reality where people are experiencing death. She has also to be open to the fact that the Spirit has been at work in the midst of these people. The Church, therefore, needs to be fully rooted in her faith in Christ and be at the same time fully immersed into the human community whose life she shares.

### **5. The Church as communion**

The Church is the sacrament of this fullness of life. In fact the early Christian community is recognized as a community that lives in love. She continues the mission of Christ by communicating His life primarily through her life of charity. She frees herself from all types of alienation which are the symptoms of division and death. In her the Trinitarian life of communion among the Father, Son and the Spirit is manifested. She becomes the hope of a new world provided that she is faithful to the Lord who communicated to her this life. What happened at the Annunciation in the case of Jesus is renewed and re-enacted at Pentecost in the case of the Church. We know that the diversities of Asia can both express her richness of life and at the same time be a danger to her fullness of life, if these differences are seen as discriminatory. It is here that the Church comes in with the message of the Gospel, reconciling and reconstituting communities of love and forgiveness. But for this she herself must become a community of reconciliation. In this context, it is very important to foster a healthy ecumenism in Asia. All the disciples of Christ should show that they believe in a common life that they have shared. Communion of all Christians play a very important role in the promotion of the mission of the Church in Asia.

### **6. The Church's mission of love and service in Asia**

In the context of the Asian situation, the Church is to have a renewed understanding of evangelization. This should not be seen merely as the devising of a new tactic to propagate Christianity.

It would be the result of a new way of being Church. Jesus Christ is already present in Asia. He has preceded the evangelizers to Asia. He is struggling to give expression to his presence in the midst of these peoples. The Church must become

an effective instrument in his hands so that He can truly meet the peoples of Asia with their cultural heritage and religiosity, with their yearning for life and communion. What are the means that the Church should use in order to fulfill her role as messengers of Christ's Gospel in this continent?

In the first place, Asia needs a witnessing Christian community. To witness does not mean to convince others; witnessing is first and foremost the quality of one who is convinced and committed. The Asian Church needs to be evangelized once again if she has to become truly an evangelizer. Secondly, the Church in Asia must appreciate more and practise effectively the contemplative dimension of Christianity. In Asia, religiosity is recognized in men and women of prayer. Evangelization through contemplation should characterize the proclamation of the Gospel in Asia. Thirdly, dialogue should become an integral element in our approach to the people of other faiths. In dialogue, we do not encounter ideas or statements of truth; but we meet persons. It is a sharing of one's experience in openness with others. Such an approach to people of other faiths will demand from us conversion of heart and readiness to enter into their experience without prejudice. A dialogical approach is perhaps the most important characteristic of our evangelizing mission in Asia with its religious pluralism. Finally no evangelization is possible anywhere without inculturation. This is inherent in the very dynamism of incarnation which is the beginning of the Good News. Inculturation will enable the Church to express her faith in a manner that is more intelligible and more experiential both for herself and for those with whom she shares her day to day life.

The agent of this evangelizing mission is the whole Christian community. The faith of the Asian Christians must become a witnessing faith. They must realize that to be a Christian means to be in a state of mission. Unfortunately our Christian communities in Asia, by and large, are quite satisfied with the sacramental and ritualistic practice of their faith. They need to be given a renewed understanding of Christian life as a witnessing presence wherever they are and whatever they do. This would call for pastors and priests and Bishops who understand their mission primarily as a ministry of the Word. They have to become animators of communities that become missionary. The

same can be said of the religious. They have to recapture the meaning of the Gospel radicality in terms of their evangelizing mission. Mary is the model of evangelization because she is the perfect hearer of the Word and the perfect witness to the faith. Her witness is the result of her deep contemplation and openness to both God and men. Our Asian continent has many Marian shrines. Mary is venerated by our people with devotion and joy. We need to give another image of Mary as evangelizer and we should try to transform our Marian shrines into places of Christian witnessing and Gospel proclamation.

### Conclusion

The third millennium is going to inaugurate a new page in the history of the Church in Asia. The main characteristic of this should be to project the image of Asian Church, as a leaven that transforms the whole human community in the midst of which she lives. She should get rid of her minority complex and become aware of the fact that she has a life that she can share with the people of other faiths so that they may find answer to the search that has been going on in their hearts for millennia. She must believe that her identity is to be a community in a state of mission. If the Synod can effect this transformation in our Christian communities, then we have begun to be really evangelized community that evangelizes the others. May the peace and life that the risen Lord offers to all the peoples of Asia resound through the length and breadth of this continent of immense spiritual and cultural heritage. May the life without death which the risen Lord offers Asia flow into the hearts of every one of our brothers and sisters through our ministry.

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# Lineamenta for the Asian Synod: Some Observations and Comments

After making some general observations about the contents of 'Lineamenta', such as the absence therein of the findings of FABC's studies and its statements, an air of triumphalism and domination instead of self-criticism and repentance, neglect of explanation of the main theme of the Synod in the light of the Gospel, the writer who is the editor of the issue comments on chapter by chapter. The article is concluded with the expression of the wide-spread reactions against the decision to hold the Synod in Rome and its possibly disastrous consequences.

In his Apostolic Letter, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, published on November 10, 1994, Pope John Paul II announced his intention of convoking a Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia. The Pope also appointed a Pre-Synodal Council and General Secretariat for the Asian Synod which began the preparatory work in Rome by various consultations. Subsequently the topic of the Asian Synod was chosen: "Jesus Christ the Saviour and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: 'That they may have life and have it abundantly' (Jn. 10: 10)". In the light of the initial consultations and responses the Pre-Synodal Council and its General Secretariat drafted a *Lineamenta* (Outline) of the topic of the Synod with an appendix of 14 questions, and circulated this document in view of responses, comments and suggestions. The responses on the document has to reach the General Secretariat before the 1st of August, 1997. In the light of these responses, the General Secretariat will prepare the Synod Document, *Instrumentum Laboris*, which will be the document for the discussion and evaluation of the Asian Synod.

While preparing these observations and comments, I also partly used the report of our Joint Faculty meeting of Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram and St. Peters, Bangalore, which discussed the Lineamenta, a copy of which report was sent to the CBCI.

### General Observations

1. The experience and insights of the Asian Christians are to a great extent lacking in the Lineamenta. The reflections and statements of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) have to be incorporated in the document. There are very few references to the FABC Documents. Most of the references are to the Encyclicals of the present Pope and also to the Catechism of the Universal Church. Vatican II Documents and its follow up by the FABC must be given more prominence in the document of the Asian Synod. I strongly suggest that a Committee of the FABC be entrusted with the work of drawing material for the Asian Synod from the FABC Statements and other documents.

2. The thrust of the document and of the Asian Synod must be the renewal of the Church, beginning with self-criticism and repentance, and a commitment to collaboration with other Churches and Asia's religions for the transformation of the life of Asia's people. But the impression one gets from the present document is that on the threshold of the third millennium the Church launches a new campaign for Evangelization in Asia in the tenor of triumphalism and domination.

3. The main theme, "Christ's Mission of Love and Service" is totally missing in the document. It must be the heart of chapter IV, and it must be drawn from the New Testament presentation of Jesus Christ. The present chapter IV is too dogmatic, presenting the Christology of later centuries in dogmatic formulations. How should we present Christ to Asia today? Christ of the Gospels, or Christ in the dogmatic formulations of the 4th and 5th centuries?

4. Chapter VI has to translate the love and service of Christ in Asia today, rather than to describe the duties of the different sections of the Church. Mother Theresa's work may be mentioned here, and it is an inspiring model for the Church in Asia. Her work is recognized by all the people in Asia. On the contrary, the missionary work in Asia for conversion and baptism is looked upon by people of other religions with suspicion and disapproval. A new perspective of mission is urgently needed in Asia today, of course not without the proclamation of Jesus Christ and His Gospel.

## **Chapter I: Asian Realities**

1. The two basic characteristics of Asia are its massive poverty and plurality of religions, especially Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam forming the majority and Christianity as a tiny minority of 2.5%. To this we have to add the variety of Asia's ethnic groups, cultures and languages, and the problems of political and socio-economic corruption, overpopulation, illiteracy, unjust wages, gender discrimination and a hoard of other problems. The mission of the Church in the latter part of the document has to be spelt out in this context of Asia. But in the document the Asian realities are presented in the first chapter, and in other chapters this context is simply left out in the discussions.

2. The present structures, patterns of worship, doctrinal and theological formulations of the Church are, to a great extent, couched in the western monocultural patterns, and to some extent, they are therefore foreign to the Asian cultures. The traditional negative understanding of the other religions have alienated Christians from others, and we have thus antagonized the adherents of other religions.

3. Today's woes of Asia has its origin in its colonial past. Before the colonial era most of the Asian nations lived in freedom and prosperity with their own indigenous socio-economic, cultural and political systems. It is the colonial conquest of the western nations which devastated most of the Asian countries and destroyed their indigenous systems. In spite of the political independence of the Asian countries, the colonial policies and systems are continued today to a great extent in the neo-colonial and multinational movements of the western countries. It is the invasion of western culture, business and tourism which corrodes the cultural and religious values of Asia. One example is the organized prostitution of women, and even children, in some parts of Asia due to western military presence and tourism. In the analysis of Asia's socio-economic and political situation this important factor is conspicuously left out in the Lineamenta.

4. In mentioning Asia's religions, other religions such as Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism and Shintoism may be also included.



5. The first chapter is concluded with the title "Redemption in Jesus Christ". I would suggest to add another title, i.e., "Gathered in the Power of the Spirit". Asia's people who belong to different religions will be united by the power and working of the Spirit which is sent by Jesus. It is this Spirit which leads us into the fullness of Truth. In the Asian context of plurality of religions a Pneumatocentric approach will be very fruitful rather than a pure Christocentric approach.

## **Chapter II: Evangelization in Asia**

1. The section on "Lessons learned from the history of mission in Asia" speaks only on the contributions and positive signs. It remains incomplete as it does not have a part on the "Failures of Christian Mission in Asia". Such a subsection has to be added. Asian mission suffered very much from the colonial attitude of "conquest", conquering peoples, cultures and religions. Consequently, the missionaries had a very negative attitude on the cultures and religions of Asia. The missionary methodology was simply importing the western models of churches, prayers, liturgies, theologies, spirituality, and art, rather than inculturating the Christian faith in the cultural and religious forms of the people of Asia. By and large, missionaries were planting the Churches and increasing the Church membership as if this alone is the mission. They were not very much involved in transforming the Asian society with the leaven of the Gospel.

2. Section of "Significant Events" has the following sentence: "The theological uncertainties of Vatican II are seen in the missiological uncertainties". This statement seems to cast aspersions on the great Ecumenical Council of Vatican II. Vatican II did not have any theological uncertainty. Rather it provided a new theological vision, a positive vision on the world that it is the place of God's action today, on the other religions that they have a purpose in God's plan of salvation. It is this new vision which provided new perspectives for the mission of the Church. Liberation, dialogue and inculturation are seen as essential constituents of Evangelization.

3. Evangelization in Asia requires a concrete pastoral action. For this a new method has to be adopted which was proposed by the FABC: the pastoral spiral methodology, that has

4 steps: (i) exposure and immersion in the Asian realities; (ii) analysis of socio-economic-religio-cultural realities; (iii) theological reflection and prayer on these findings and experiences; (iv) pastoral planning in an ongoing process of praxis. This has to be introduced in the centres of formation and theological education. Besides this, the laity has to be given due role in the church and formation facilities. They should also be empowered to act. In short, the community should take priority over hierarchical structures, though the hierarchy has its role of guiding the community.

4. We have to recognize the presence of the Spirit of God in history, guiding the salvation of all people. Our approach has to be hence continuation of dialogue with other religions, positively recognizing the gospel values present among them, and holding dialogue also with the historical socio-cultural movements. Since the Asian reality is the poor masses who are deeply religious seeking God and longing for spiritual fulfillment, the church has to become the church of the poor catering to their needs and aspirations. The cultural elements that are oppressive to the people should be challenged by the church. In short, this should be the new approach of evangelization in Asia: Involvement in the life and struggles of the people so that they may have life in its fullness, and dialogue with Asia's religions and cultures along with proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ.

### **Chapter III: God's Salvific Design in History**

1. God's salvific design is manifested in Jesus who proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom and set it as the goal of salvation history. Establishment of the Kingdom of God is the mission of the Church. Although the Kingdom of God and Jesus cannot be separated, proclaiming the Kingdom and Jesus are not exactly the same, as Jesus never proclaimed himself, but proclaimed the love of the Father and His Kingdom or God's Reign. This Kingdom-centred approach is totally lacking in chapter III. Nowhere in the chapter we find the idea of the Kingdom of God which was the heart of Jesus' proclamation, and in fact the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is very much relevant in Asia's religiously pluralistic context. Of course, there are two references to the Kingdom of God in chapter V (no. 26, no. 29), when the document speaks

about the Church. But here the Church is identified with the Kingdom of God, though the idea of the proclamation of the Kingdom is included.

2 Mission is presented in this chapter as leading all people to Jesus Christ, who is the fullness of God's revelation. What is the meaning of leading people to Jesus Christ? Should it necessarily mean that Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims are asked to renounce their religion and accept Christianity? Or, could it mean a purification of all faiths in an encounter with Christ and His Gospel? What is the meaning and message of Jesus Christ in a religiously pluralistic world? What is the meaning of leading people to Jesus Christ? Should it mean that people of all religions have to accept Him as the One and Only Saviour? All these questions have to be investigated.

3. Evangelization in Asia requires closer and intense relationship with the people of other religions. A better knowledge about other religious traditions is a must. We can learn very much from other religions: profound respect and worship of God the Mystery, respect for the elders in family, value of renunciation and asceticism, compassion and kindness to all beings, contemplation and prayer, and oneness with the whole nature. In turn the church can offer the values of love of neighbour, justice, which are central to the mystery of Christ. It is here and in this manner that we offer Jesus Christ as God's good news, and it is here that we explain to others the role of the church in bringing unity and mutual respect, as the instrument of unity and community.

#### **Chapter IV: Jesus Christ — God's Good News of Salvation to All**

1. The title, "Jesus Christ: The Church's Gift to Asia" seems to be very presumptuous and triumphalistic, as if the Church possesses Jesus Christ. Jesus possesses the Church and not the other way. The Church is only a humble instrument in the hands of Jesus Christ. Better to say that Jesus Christ is God's Gift to Asia. Jesus Christ and His Mystery cannot be possessed by the Church. The Church along with the whole humanity has to continuously search for understanding the mystery of the person and work of Jesus Christ.



2. "God wills that all peoples come to the knowledge of His Son through faith and baptism" (no. 25) seems to be a strong statement. It means that God wills that all people join the Church by means of baptism. If God has willed a religiously pluralistic world, the former statement may not be correct. After all, God's will is not a wishful thinking of God, but his will is always effective. Proclamation of Jesus Christ to all people is one thing, and quite another that all people have to become the members of the Church.

3. How could we present Jesus Christ in a religiously pluralistic situation? In India for the vast majority of Hindus Jesus Christ is "Godman". His person and teaching have inspired and continue to inspire many. He is proposed as God Incarnate who has come to forgive our sins and reconcile us with God. Also as the one who has taught the radical love of neighbour and as the one who has linked salvation with this love. He is the one who has come to renew all things and he is the Lord of history, the fullness of revelation and salvation. We have to proclaim and witness to Jesus Christ by living the gospel values. We cannot separate the proclamation of Christ and promotion of gospel values. Both go together intrinsically linked. The uniqueness of Christ and the validity of other religions is a dogmatic question. The salvific value and role of other religions and religious figures are not unrelated to the salvific mediatorship of Christ. All these belong to the one economy of salvation. Historically the believers of other religions are saved by their religions and saviours; however, ultimately, in the Christian perspective, it is related to the mediatorship of Christ; it is God who saves all and it is manifested in Christ whose presence and activity is not limited to the Church.

## **Chapter V: The Church as Communion**

1. This is perhaps the best chapter which presents an ecclesiology of Communion. The Church is called to continue the mission of Jesus and the Spirit of gathering the people into a communion. It is the sign and sacrament of the Kingdom of God, the sacrament of unity. But the Church is not an exclusive communion and unity. This communion exists in various levels, and it is promoted by various ways. Among the believers of different

religions the communion is fostered by interreligious dialogue. How the Church could be a sacrament of unity in the different situations of Asia has to be elaborated.

2. Christ's mission in the Spirit is to unify the whole humanity into one family/body of which the Church is a sign and sacrament. The Kingdom theology is a great inspiration in this task and mission of the Church. The Church-centred mission has given way in Asia to a Christ-centred and Kingdom-centred mission. The Church has become the servant of the Kingdom, and the Church accepts today the role of other religions and Spirit-led movements in contributing towards the building up of the Kingdom of God. Evangelization of cultures, dialogue with other religions, task of transforming the unjust and inhuman social and political structures are understood today in Asia as the essential aspects of evangelization, and these cannot be separated from the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Mission of the Church in Asia in future shall be along these lines, and the result will be a new face of the Church in Asia. Christianity has to become a powerful force in Asia rather than a minority religion.

3. Christian communities in Asia do not have a separate existence, though they meet separately for prayer, worship and apostolic activities. Their life is one with people of other faiths. They are together in building up authentic human communities by their commitment and involvement in building up their nations and their socio-economic and political systems. In most of the Asian countries the Catholic Church has not yet joined the National Councils of Churches where all other Churches are members. Hence we do not really have a common witness in Asia. People of other religions are confused and scandalized by the divisions and rivalries among the various Churches. They do understand the diversity among the Churches as other religions also have this rich variety or pluriformity. But collaboration and common witness is a must. The Catholic Church must join the National Councils of Churches in all the Asian countries and thus try for a common witness. The recent initiatives between the FABC and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) for collaboration and common witness in Asia have to be welcomed and deepened with enthusiasm.

4. In India the ecumenical relationship among the various Churches and ecclesial traditions is not up to the mark. First of all, there exist conflicts and tensions among the three Catholic Individual Churches, Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara, in India. The Oriental Catholic Churches in India do not have freedom for evangelization in the whole of India as their jurisdiction is restricted. Adequate pastoral care of the emigrants of the Oriental Catholics in the Latin territories is another inter-ecclesial problem. On these two questions clear directives are given by the Vatican II, they are not fully implemented in India.

5. In the mission of the Church interreligious dialogue is an essential part. In India interreligious dialogue and prayer sessions are a regular feature in many states and cities. They are conducted both at the popular and scholarly levels in different Centres and institutions. Here initiatives are often from the part of Christians and Churches. Whenever interreligious conflicts arise, public meetings are also held to promote interreligious harmony. The role of the Churches in the promotion of inter-religious harmony and peace is very well appreciated by all religions and sections of people. The concern for the future may be to bring dialogue from the higher academic level to the popular level and to make it a mass movement in India, especially in the context of sporadic Hindu-Muslim conflicts.

## **Chapter VI: The Church's Mission of Love and Service in Asia**

1. The Chapter has no focus and thrust. It is very general. The FABC had on several occasions made a thrust on the mission of the Church in Asia: The Asian Churches are in need of a triple immersion or baptism — immersion into the life of Asia's poor, immersion into the rich cultures of Asia, immersion into the religious traditions of Asia. If this task is carried out, a real Asian Church will emerge with its own identity and originality, and it will be a great and unique contribution to the Universal Church.

2. The Vatican II is the beginning of a positive understanding of the other religions of the world. Deepening of this positive understanding is an important task of the Asian Churches which are living side by side with the major World Religions.



Here the starting point has to be our experience with the people of other faiths and not the dogmatic formulations of the past, however ancient they may be. There is a statement in no. 33: "In dialogue the Church receives the religious and cultural riches of the nations and in turn gives them the saving riches of Jesus Christ". This would imply that the other religions are not ways of salvation to their believers. The Church has to accept that the other religions are ways of revelation and salvation to their believers. There is indeed one economy of salvation, but in this economy of salvation other religions too do play a salvific role. In God's plan they are also ways of revelation and salvation. But they are not parallel and unrelated to the salvation achieved by Jesus Christ. The relation between the ways of other religions and the mediation of Christ remains a mystery. Hence the Church has to humbly acknowledge that other religions are also ways of revelation and salvation to their believers. But the Church has always to proclaim the salvation given in and by Jesus Christ, and to try to understand its relationship to the salvation given in other religions.

3. The Church's mission in Asia calls for inculturation. Inculturation of theology, liturgy, spirituality, art, will emerge only when we as a community of Christians live the life style of the masses and speak their language. Asian reality is plurality of cultures. One may not absolutise one particular cultural form and symbol. New forms also can emerge. In the Indian Churches inculturation process is at a low ebb today. Immediately after the Vatican II and "the Church in India Seminar", there was a lot of enthusiasm for inculturation in theology, worship, spirituality, and Christian art and architecture. But later on, due to some instructions from Rome, most of the experimentations were stopped. Some popular reaction also came from the unenlightened laity and clergy who called it as "Hinduization". The inculturation in terms of Brahmanic theology and cult was also opposed by the Dalit people. And here they make a very valid point. Inculturation shall not be exclusively in terms of dominant cultures. Little traditions and cultures shall be taken care of in the process of inculturation.

### **Conclusion**

There is a wide-spread reaction all over Asia against the decision of convening the Asian Synod in Rome, and not somewhere

in Asia. It means much for the Asian Catholic Churches to meet and discuss in their own soil, in the actual context of their own life-situations. It is not a question of nationalistic spirit or the feeling of Asian consciousness, but a theological question, the question of the legitimate autonomy of the Asian Churches. Who will be the decision-makers of the Asian Synod? Asian Catholic leaders, or some officials at the Roman Curia?

What do we expect from the Asian Synod of Bishops? If the Asian Catholic Churches are ready to grapple with the Asian realities and problems and if they can competently analyse and reflect upon their situation and pose questions in the light of the Gospel and in the power of the Spirit who is already at work in the midst of the Asian people, Asian Christian answers will emerge and subsequently the face of the Asian Churches will be renewed and an authentic Asian Church will emerge. But if the Synod is going to be manipulated as a platform for imposing already-made decisions in Rome upon the Asian Catholic Bishops, the Synod will be a total catastrophe to the Asian Churches. If so, the future of the Asian Churches will be doomed and its fate will be the same as that of the Western Churches which are bankrupt today and have become a remnant of its past glory.

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# Local Church in the FABC Statements

It was the urgent call of the Local Church that gave rise to FABC. True to its origin, its main concern has been what a Church in Asia should be. Right from the start FABC conceived the local Church as a communion and a community of mission. But what distinguishes the Asian Churches' mission is their dialogue with Asia's realities such as its history, cultures, religions and its peoples, especially the poor and their liberation and development. The language of the FABC is different from that of its counterpart: In the place of the latter's air of superiority, triumphalism and exclusiveness, the language of the former is of relatedness, service, dialogue and harmony; as servant of the Kingdom the Church has to follow the life and ministry of Jesus.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) was conceived at the Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM) of 1970 held during the visit of Pope Paul VI to Manila, to make the Church in Asia ever suited to proclaim the Gospel to Asia. Right from its first meeting at Taipei 1974, the major concern of the FABC has been what it means to be a Church of Jesus Christ in Asia, a continent that is witnessing the birth of new societies in the post colonial era. Thus directly or indirectly the local church and its mission is at the core of the FABC reflections. Though the Bishops do not give a definition of the local church, it is the key concept in their statements, almost parallel to Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom in the Gospels. It is the fundamental ecclesiological concept of the FABC and the unifying basis for all ecclesiological models scattered in different documents.

The term local church in the FABC documents can mean the church in a particular country, a diocese, a parish, or even a small/basic Christian community. The specific meaning is to be determined from the context of the statements. The adjective "local" for the FABC has a theological significance, as observed by L. Nemet. For the historico-cultural context in which a church is situated is part of the divine plan (1994:78). As the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church declared, each local



church must embody the context to which it is inserted as the Gospel leaven, the task entrusted to it by the Servant Lord (n. 25). This in turn demands that each local church becomes fully responsible and must have the legitimate autonomy which its natural and harmonious growth demands (n. 25).

### **The Local Church is a Communion**

Right from its inception, for the FABC the local church in Asia is a communion. The very FABC is a movement towards community and communion of the Asian Bishops and in them and through them, of the churches of Asia. It must be remembered that the Bishops as pastors are not primarily concerned with theological description of the local church, rather their focus is the pastoral experience of the church in Asia. Thus it is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in the given people and context of Asia (FABC 1: 10).

The Third General Assembly of the FABC in Bangkok, Thailand, had the general theme, the Church — a Community of Faith in Asia and considered the Church as a community realizing its communion and mission in its own being and life, and in relation to other communities in the midst of whom the Christian communities live (FABC 111: 5). The church in its deepest level is a communion rooted in the life of the Trinity and thus in its essential reality is a sacrament of the loving self-communion of God and the graced response of the redeemed humankind in faith, hope and love (FABC 111: 7). The local church in Asia is a Communion of communities where all recognize and accept each other as brothers and sisters sharing in God's Word and the breaking of the bread (FABC V: 8.1.1).

The local churches of Asia are in communion with the rest of the local churches in the Universal Church, especially with the see of Peter (ABM 28; FABC 1: 2). The see of Peter presides over the Universal Church and thus is the symbol of unity (FABC 1: 11). FABC V invites all, laity, religious and clergy to live out the Christian life as a communion at every level of the ecclesial existence as the sacrament of the Risen Lord (8.1.1). It is a participatory communion in which all share in the gifts of the Holy Spirit (8.1.2). The church in Asia must extend this communion to all people of Asia in its witness to the Risen Lord through a dialogue of life (8.1.3). The Asian church's life of

communion becomes a prophetic sign and transforming leaven in the Asian society, yearning for communion.

This FABC understanding of the local church as a communion, in the particular Asian contexts, stands in the sound tradition of the New Testament. In the proto-Pauline epistles the term church was used primarily for the communion of Christians of a given region or city before it was applied more abstractly to the whole body of Christians (I Thes 1:1; Gal 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; II Cor 1:1, etc.).

### **A missionary church**

As elsewhere, the local churches of Asia are churches in mission. They are subjects of mission, evangelizing churches, though at the same time they are evangelized as well. Their identity is precisely their mission. However what distinguishes the Asian Church is the manner of executing this mission. In Asia mission is to be discharged through dialogue. Practically every General Assembly of the FABC affirmed that the "basic mode of mission in Asia must be dialogue". It is a missionary dialogue in the sense that it is a search to find the meeting point of the Gospel values with Asian realities and the peoples of Asia, with their histories, cultures and their religions and the poor masses of Asia. According to C. G. Arevalo, one of the leading FABC advisors, "this overarching programme of dialogue with the cultures (i. e., inculturation), with the religions and religious traditions (i. e., interreligious dialogue), and with our peoples especially the poor multitudes in Asia" (i. e., development/liberation), has been the thematic background of both the pastoral and missionary activity of the local churches of Asia" (1992:xx). This triple dialogue is the focus of the FABC understanding of the local church in Asia and its mission.

The Bishops, immersed as they are in the Asian realities, demonstrate a profound concern to orient and lead the Church of Christ in the midst of Asian realities and to respond to the call of discipleship as fully as possible in this reality. They are aware that this reality is not a carbon copy of other contexts and hence the need to search their own response.

### **Dialogue with the poor**

For the local churches of Asia to be in dialogue with their context is above all a dialogue with the poor. The poor of Asia

are deprived of access to material goods and resources which they need to create a truly human life for themselves. The bishops emphasize that the poor are deprived, because they live under oppression and live in social, economic and political structures which have injustice built into them (FABC 1:19). Hence the local churches in Asia must enter into a dialogue of life with them leading to an inside experience and understanding of this poverty. This in turn should create a genuine commitment to bring about social justice in Asian societies (FABC 1:21).

Reaffirming the statement of the Special Synod of 1971 on Justice in the World, the Asian Bishops declared: "Actions in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel..., for we believe that this, in our time, is part and parcel of "preaching the Good News to the poor" (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:18) (FABC 1:22). Further, "Evangelization and the promotion of true human development and liberation, are not only not opposed, but make up today the integral preaching of the Gospel, especially in Asia" (FABC 1:23). Confronted with increasing poverty and injustice the church in Asia links with its mission the tasks of human development and building up of a fraternal community, and the promotion of the fundamental dignity of human persons as sons and daughters of God (FABC III:8.1).

In the context of massive poverty whereby hundreds of millions of people are debarred from access to natural resources the church in Asia will make itself powerless with those who are weak and powerless, in compassion. But it will be a compassion that denounces in deeds and words the injustices, oppressions, exploitations and inequalities resulting in so much of suffering. This compassion will see and welcome in all especially in the poor, deprived and oppressed, the very person of Christ who united himself with every human being (FABC V:6.4).

The essential spirituality of the Local church in Asia requires solidarity and compassion with the poor and struggles for the removal of divisions among its people (FABC IV:4. 8. 7) Its prayer binds the Asian church to solidarity with the poor and powerless, the marginalized and oppressed in Asia (FABC 11:23). It moulds the Asian church to Christ-like sensitivity to the cries and sufferings of the poor in order to



respond generously and courageously to the needs of the poor and to join them in their struggle for a full life (FABC IV : 4.8.9).

### **Dialogue with the Religions of Asia**

As we said earlier, dialogue summarizes the FABC approach to mission. In the context of the religious pluralism of Asia the Bishops situate the proclamation of Jesus Christ through dialogue and deeds (FABC V : 4. 1). The FABC journey on Dialogue starts right from the Bishops' Meeting at Manila in 1970 when they pledged to "an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development" (ABM Res. no 12). Since then the local churches of Asia have tried to make this pledge a reality.

The very title of the Final Statement of the Bishops at their fifth General Assembly, "Journeying Together", manifests the FABC's vision of the local churches of Asia. It shows how the churches in Asia are on a joint pilgrimage with the followers of other religions. Hence mission in Asia involves dialogue with the followers of these religions. For only through dialogue can the local church in Asia give them reverence and honour and acknowledge that God has drawn them to Himself through them (FABC 1:15). Dialogue will enable the Asian church to touch the expression and the reality of the deepest selves of the Asian peoples and enable the church to find authentic ways of living and expressing its own faith (FABC 1:16). Dialogue for local churches in Asia is also an expression of their quest for God and for fraternity among God's children.

In their second General Assembly the Bishops reaffirmed the importance of dialogue for the Asian church and showed how dialogue opens it to the marvellous ways of prayers that the Spirit has taught them. Through them we too can hear His voice to lift our hearts to God. Hence the Bishops encourage the local churches in Asia to enter into dialogue with others with the attitudes of openness and sensitivity, honesty and humility of spirit, a sincere disinterestedness and fraternal love which holds in reverence the feelings of others (FABC 11:35-36).

In the context of religious revivalism and fundamentalism seen in most Asian countries, the Bishops invite the church in Asia to witness the radicalism of the Gospel of love, even in the most provocative, intricate and exasperating situations through a dialogue of life with all and thus to become an instrument of unity and fellowship among various groups (FABC IV : 3. 1. 10-11). In this dialogue of life the laity can play a vital role.

No doubt, proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and primary element of evangelization. However for the church in Asia "to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbours of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds—this is the first call to the Churches in Asia" (FABC V : 4.1).

Through the mission of dialogue the Asian church promotes unity of the peoples of Asia marked by such a diversity of beliefs, cultures, and socio-political structures. Thus the Asian church becomes the visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony (FABC V : 4. 2).

What we see in the pronouncements of the Bishops is an expression of a conviction that the Asian church has gained through direct encounter with the followers of other religions, rather than conclusions drawn from theological arguments. This has been further developed by FABC's Institutes for Religious and Ecumenical Affairs in their statements.

### **Dialogue with Asian Cultures**

A major concern of the Bishops is that the local churches of Asia must be fully incarnated in their local realities. All the Asian churches are seen by their respective co-nationals as foreign churches. Hence already at their first General Assembly the bishops set the priority of establishing a truly local church in Asia (FABC 1 : 9). Thus inculturation has served as the focal point of all other activities. All the later FABC documents build on this basic target.

The bishops do not understand culture in the restricted sense of certain traditionally handed on signs and meaning systems. Culture rather is the entire context of the Asian churches. The FABC is gripped with an urgency to enter into the

Asian contextual realities. Every aspect of the Asian reality must become part of the Asian church's mission. The needs, aspirations and struggles of the Asian people have to find their way into the Asian church's concern. Only then can the church in Asia claim to be serious in inculturation (FABC 1:13-24).

At the third General Assembly of the FABC Bishop Francesco Claver in his discussion Guide for the workshop sessions put forth the challenge of the local church of Asia as sharing of ideas, concerns, works of charity and justice, defense of human rights, and dignity — which though not sole prerogative of Christians, are Christian when done in a Christian way, i. e., the community coming together, to reflect, discern together and from their own cultural way of doing things and in the light of the Gospel values as they at that moment understood them and their coming up with their provisional understanding of that all important "way of Christ" (1983 : 70).

Already at the Manila Meeting the Bishops underlined the need for the church in Asia to be inculturated in the wider sense of the term. They expressed their conviction that the life and message of the Gospel in Asia must enter into dialogue with fellow Asians with their own cultural traditions and religions and collaborate with them for freedom, justice and peace (ABM 24-26). The pluralistic and newly awakening context of Asia challenges the Asian church to creativity and to be inserted into the context of our time and cultures (FABC 11:12). Asian Forms of prayer, especially the body-psyche-spirit type of contemplation, can mould the local church's forms of prayer (FABC 11 : 30-33).

The Asian church can detect the movement of the Spirit in the labour and struggles of its brothers and sisters and thus must become more authentic communities of faith. Genuine participation and co-responsibility must be the essential elements of its existence (FABC III : 14-15). Similarly speaking about the vocation and mission of the laity, the Bishops described discipleship in Asia as rooted and incarnated in the Asian realities FABC (IV 4. 8-3).

Thus for FABC inculturation has to do primarily with the life and mission of the local churches of Asia. It is not church-oriented but world-oriented in the sense that the church's



inculturation efforts are for the sake of the Kingdom to be realized in the world of Asia. The presence of the Kingdom makes the church's effort of inculturation all the more challenging which the local churches in Asia have to do with the rest of humankind (FABC IV:3.2.3).

In this sense the primary focus of Evangelization in Asia at this time of the history is the building up of a truly local church (FABC 1:10), a "church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and living dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions,— in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own" (FABC 1:12)

The Bishops while stressing the need of the local churches in Asia to be immersed in the culture and realities of Asia, equally underline the need for communion with other local churches with whom they share the one faith, one Spirit and the one sacramental life as well as communion with the see of Peter that presides over the universal church (FABC 1:11). In this we can see certain theological maturity. The Bishops do not see the local churches of Asia as mere extensions or administrative units of a universal church but as the incarnation of the Mystery of Jesus Christ in Asia and in Asian realities. Thus the local churches in Asia enjoy equality with the rest of the local churches and are responsible for the mission of witnessing to Jesus Christ in the context of Asia. This is something that the sister churches of the West have to appreciate and respect.

### **Servant of God's reign in Asia**

The mission in terms of the triple dialogue that we have described shows how the FABC sees the end of mission as the reign of God for Asia. To make the church of Asia a better sign and instrument of the reign of God is the call of the Asian Bishops (see BIRA IV/2). The Statement of the IVth Plenary Assembly begins with the prayer "May your Kingdom come" (Lk 11:2). The Bishops see this prayer of Jesus as a cry from the heart of Asia, an arena of conflict and division, a continent of suffering humanity, cradle of cultures, birth place of great religions (FABC IV:1). "May your Kingdom Come!" is both the vocation and challenge to the local churches of Asia. The battered

conditions of Asia, with its poverty, wretchedness and misery show the contradictions of the continent. It groans with pain and waits for God to set its whole being free (IV : 1. 3).

The Bishops acknowledge the fact that the struggle for a full human life is not confined to the Christian community alone and hence the church in Asia must collaborate with the many great religions in seeking the full flowering of the human person and the transformation of the world of Asia "into that which pleases the creator" (Gen 1) (FABC IV:3.0.2). Thus the Bishops see the Asian church more as a leaven for the liberation and transformation of Asian society. "Asian world needs", they observed, "the values of the Kingdom and of Christ in order to bring about human development, justice, peace and harmony with God, among peoples and with all creation that peoples of Asia long for" (FABC V : 3. 2. 5). Thus the church in Asia will be more in the nature of a contrast society, as embodiment of the values of the Gospel and serving as the leaven transforming the Asian cultures from within, as Pope Paul VI described mission (EN 18). The major service that the church in Asia has to render is to prepare Asia for the inbreaking of the divine reign.

The local churches of Asia will discern and work out the best way the Gospel is to be proclaimed (FABC V : 3.3. 1). It is not a question of parrot-like repetition of what is said or done elsewhere, rather must be evolved in dialogue among the local churches themselves and with other persons of good will. Hence the FABC challenges the local churches of Asia to be creative and responsive to the local situation and evolve a missiology that is relevant to the Asian context (3. 3. 1)

Mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word (3.1. 2). "It is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local churches" (3.3.1). In other words a local church is not just a community of faith, sacraments and hierarchy, as it is normally understood, nor even a community that has adapted itself to the local customs to a great extent, but more so a community that is truly a transforming agent

in the local context, and bringing new life which the people can experience as responding to their problems and aspirations.

Naturally, the local churches of Asia exist to proclaim Jesus Christ. (4.1). However this proclamation is primarily "the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, a proclamation through Christ-like deeds", asserts the Bishops (4.1). Mission in Asia is not making claims about Jesus Christ or propagating doctrines about him, but following him in his ministry. For the Asian local churches there is no participation in Jesus Christ without participating in his ministry. They must be living parables of the self-giving love of God and the human response to this which happened in the ministry of Jesus. This is the service that they can render to the Asia of today.

This aspect of service runs through the Statement of the VIth Plenary Assembly of the Bishops. "We join Jesus in serving life by washing the feet of our neighbours" (FABC VI:14.3). The churches in Asia "must live in companionship, as true partners with all Asians", said the Bishops at Bandung (FABC V: 6.2). These are courageous words. There is no question of superiority or uniqueness though the churches in Asia have the specific service to render to the world of Asia as the servants of the Kingdom. As far as the human beings are concerned the FABC does not make any distinction between Christians and non Christians, in so far as every person is created by Christ and united to himself and the church must walk along with them in solidarity (FABC V: 6.2). All human beings are members of the same human family, children of God (6.4). The Christian specificity is the obligation of service the Christian has to render as the disciple of Jesus Christ (6.3). Christians are to serve Asia in the manner of Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve (10:45).

Instead of making any show of power, the church in Asia will serve with the power of Jesus Christ who emptied himself and took the form of a servant (Phil. 2: 7) (FABC V: 6.5). This service alone is the distinguishing characteristic of the Asian church. The FABC Colloquium on the Social Doctrine of the Church gave expression to this service when it described the mission of the church in Asia as "walking humbly, acting justly, loving tenderly in Asia" (1992: 367).

### Concluding remarks

From what we have seen it is clear how the Bishops of Asia have not given a structural description of the local churches in Asia. The identity of the Asian local churches is seen from their mission to the Asian world. From the insistence on the Asian context and on the need for the triple dialogue the FABC manifests its desire for inculturation and diversification and local autonomy without losing the unity of faith. "It implies", in the words of Bishop Gali Bali, "a church fully belonging to Asia and each of its components. It implies an ecclesiology more concerned with community than with structures of power, even 'sacred power'" (1993: 30) (Bali Gali 1993 "The Problems of Asia of a Theological & Moral Nature" in *Doctrinal & Moral Problems of Asia*, CBCI Commission for Clergy & Religion, New Delhi, pp 20-33).

The identity of the Asian local churches can further be seen from the language the FABC uses. It is conspicuously different from the language of its Western counterparts. Here we rarely come across expressions of superiority, triumphalism, absolutism, exclusiveness, monopoly, uniqueness, etc. On the contrary what we find is a language of presence, service, harmony and relatedness. Rather than making truth claims for the local churches of Asia the Bishops ask how these can meaningfully be present in the Asian reality and how they can render a relevant service to the pluralistic context of Asia. The local churches of Asia are in pilgrimage along with the rest of the Asian peoples, participating in their struggles. They are not rivals to be defeated nor are they fortresses to be conquered. They, rather, are fellow-seekers to be respected and collaborated with. The local churches of Asia are called to share with the rest of Asia their God-experience in Jesus Christ. This is the service they are to render to Asia by becoming the servants of the divine reign that was manifested in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.



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# Theological Perspectives of FABC on Interreligious Dialogue

Sebastian Painadath, Director of Sameeksha, Centre for Indian Spirituality, studies the documents of the FABC assemblies and seminars 1970–1995 and exposes systematically the Asian theological perspectives on religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue. Asian bishops understand the plurality of religions in Asia as a grace, and as a God-given call to go on pilgrimage with believers of other religions in pursuit of Truth in love. The deep christological insights, the broad ecclesiological vision and the contextualised pastoral directives of FABC point to a 'new way' of being the Church' in Asia. They could offer new perspectives to the deliberations of the forthcoming Asian Synod.

Asia is the womb of the great world religions. A rich variety of primal religions is still alive in most of the Asian countries. All great scriptural religions have been born on the Asian soil. The psyche of an average Asian is still shaped by spiritual experiences<sup>1</sup> and religious traditions. The reality of religious pluralism is not merely a socio-historical fact but a divine grace, too. Asian peoples give living witness to the plurality of ways through which God speaks to humanity and the manifold ways in which human persons and communities respond to God's Word. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) right from the beginning took note of this theological context and committed themselves to 'acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among the people of Asia as well as the values in their society and culture'<sup>1</sup>. At the very first Meeting in Manila in 1970 the Asian Bishops made their fundamental option clear: "We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere and continuing dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development."<sup>2</sup>

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1. II Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

2. FABC, 1970, 12 (9).

With this the Bishops, and through them the Catholic communities of Asia, were taking upon themselves the responsibility to promote a culture of dialogue in all realms of life and thought. This meant a certain departure from the traditional patterns of theology and pastoral praxis, much of which has been inherited from the colonial period. Hence the bishops "pledged themselves to develop an indigenous theology and to do what they can so that the life and message of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historic cultures of Asia".<sup>3</sup>

In view of clarifying the theological perspectives and developing proper pastoral orientations in this regard FABC initiated a series of research seminars entitled Bishops' Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA), Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA) Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (BIMA) and Faith Encounters in Social Action [FEISA]. Over the last quarter of a century several such seminars were conducted in different countries of Asia; the statements of these FABC seminars offer a rich material for a theology of interreligious dialogue that is well inculturated in the fertile soil of Asia and at the same time relevant for the universal Church to develop open perspectives on religious pluralism. In the context of the forthcoming Asian Synod it may be good to take note of the basic patterns of theological thinking that emerged through this creative process of responsible search in the Asian Church.

### History of Humanity as the History of Salvation

The experience of the immanence of the Divine is a basic perception of the Asian religious psyche. History of humanity evolves not outside God but within the Divine. The divine Spirit recreates everything into a new creation that we have experienced in the risen Christ. "Because Jesus is risen, we realize that the promise of life is not empty; our common search will not end in senselessness but in life."<sup>4</sup> This theonomous process is moving towards the eschatological state in which God will be all in all [1 Cor. 15: 28]. The entire history is therefore to be understood as the history of revelation and salvation. In order to express this theological dimension of universal history bishops use the Asian image of speech [*vac*]: "God is present and working through the Spirit in the whole of creation; the history of salvation tells us

3. FABC, 1970, 13 (9)

4. FABC, 1995, 14.4

that God is continuously dialoguing with human persons."<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II uses this imagery to clarify the theological significance of dialogue with believers of other religions: "Interreligious dialogue at its deepest level is always a dialogue of salvation, because it seeks to discover, clarify and understand better the signs of the age-long dialogue which God maintains with humanity."<sup>6</sup> Consequently dialogue gets a sort of sacramental character: "By dialogue we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God."<sup>7</sup> The universal history of the spiritual evolution of humanity is therefore the history of the ongoing dialogue between God and humanity.

### Religions as Salvific Means

This dialogue between God and humanity is perceived and articulated in religions. Religion is the symbolic expression of a revelatory experience. Religions thus become the language of the God-man dialogue that takes place at the depth of culture. Since there is a rich variety in cultures there is an immense diversity in the ways in which this dialogue finds religious articulation. Plurality of religions is therefore a fact of God's salvific plan. FABC acknowledges this theological significance of the plurality of religions: "We accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation."<sup>8</sup> The inexhaustible mystery of the Divine finds finite forms of self-manifestation in diverse ways. "The religious traditions of Asia are expressions of the presence of God's Word and of the universal action of God's Spirit in them".<sup>9</sup> The Asian bishops acknowledge the revelatory and salvific character of Asian religions. In this they pick up the vision of Vatican II and go beyond the theological framework of traditional western theology which shies away from accepting believers of other religions as 'equal partners'.<sup>10</sup> With a genuine sensitivity to the divine Spirit working in other religions the bishops say: "The ancient religions of the orient ... have been for

5. Mission Congress, 1979, Consensus Paper, III, 3 (141)

6. Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 13 Nov, 1992, Bulletin of the Council, 32 (1993) p, 6

7. Pope John Paul II, Address to Leaders of non-Christian religions, Madras, 5 Febr, 1986, AAS 78 (1986) p. 769.

8. FABC 1974, 14 (14)

9. Theological Consultation, 1991, 43(344).

10. BIRA I, 1979, 12 (111)



us in Asia the doorway to God."<sup>11</sup> "God's saving will is at work in many different ways in all these religions."<sup>12</sup> "God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them."<sup>13</sup> "We need to understand it [the Asian reverential sense of the sacred] as the work of the creative Spirit of the God of Life, who in all things and among every people is healing, renewing and recreating in ever new, ever mysterious ways."<sup>14</sup> Religions are therefore means of God's saving work in this pluralistic world. Human persons and communities respond to this one universal call of the Spirit in diverse ways. "The great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures."<sup>15</sup> Therefore 'diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, 'since it represents richness and strength. The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness.<sup>16</sup> "The many ways of responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit must be continually in conversation with one another."<sup>17</sup> In this proclaimed willingness to 'acknowledge, preserve and promote' [Vat. II] the genuine diversity of religions the Asian Bishops have courageously responded to the 'sign of the times' and thus initiated an age of dialogue in Asia. "In the rich diversity of ancient Asian cultures and faiths is a vision of unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples. In this context we seek to become persons of dialogue."<sup>18</sup> Their theological perception is also a powerful incentive to the universal Church to examine critically its attitudes to believers of other religions for these attitudes have been shaped over centuries through a monocultural existence in Europe.

### Christ as the Centre

In attempting a positive assessment of the plurality of religions FABC does not lose its grounding in the Christ experience. Asian bishops are well aware that there is no neutral theology: christian theology is the articulation of faith in the revelatory and salvific event of Jesus the Christ. God's self-revelation in and through Jesus the Christ is for us Christians 'the way and the

11. FABC 1974, 12 (23).

13. FABC 1974, 15 (14).

15. BIRA IV/7, 1988, 12 (310).

17. BIRA IV/3, 1986, 16 (261).

12. BIRA II, 1979, 12 (115).

14. FABC 1995, 11.

16. BIRA IV/11, 1988, 15 (321).

18. FABC 1995, 10.

truth' of the perception of God's saving presence in history. But an Asian Christian cannot interpret it in an absolutising or exclusivistic way because the Asian religious psyche resonates with the pluralism of reality. Only with an openness to 'the Spirit that blows where it wills' and consequently with a genuine tolerance towards the authentic spiritual experiences of others can Asian Christians proclaim Jesus as the Christ. The Bishops acknowledge that with believers of other religions we Christians are 'fellow-pilgrims' in relentless pursuit of the inexhaustible mystery of God's plan of salvation.<sup>19</sup> Joining in this spiritual pilgrimage as servants of Christ's mission in Asia we want to proclaim in unambiguous terms that we experience in Christ 'the centre of the process of God's universal dialogue with humanity.'<sup>20</sup> Consequently 'any effort towards an experience of immediate access to the Spirit has to be seen in relation to Jesus Christ'; any discernment of the Spirit stands in relation to the Church's memory and interpretation of the reality of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> In the wake of Vat. II bishops affirm that 'in Christ God's plan for all things and all peoples is fulfilled',<sup>22</sup> and 'in the Christ-event all mankind is rooted'.<sup>23</sup> Hence 'all salvation attained by human persons is the fruit of the gift of Christ'.<sup>24</sup>

These christological statements are not to be taken in an exclusivistic sense but as expressions of a deep sense of being gripped by faith in Jesus the Christ. Faith language is love language, a language of intimacy and ecstasy. When an Asian Christian speaks of Christ out of a deep faith experience it is a sharing of one's intimate experience in the process of a spiritual pilgrimage with sisters and brothers of other religions. And on the Asian continent, which is fertile with spiritual experiences, Christ can be proclaimed only from within an authentic and personal contemplative experience. A language of dogmatism can only betray Christ in Asia; 'triumphalistic attitudes' of Christians will only disfigure the image of the Church in Asia.<sup>25</sup> Bishops perceive this: "For us, interreligious dialogue flows from the nature of the Church, a community in pilgrimage journeying with peoples

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19. BIRA IV/6, 1987, 6 (304).

20. Mission Congress, 1979, Consensus Paper, III, 3 (141).

21. BIRA IV/3, 1986, 11 & 13 (260).

22. BIRA IV/7, 1988, 10 (310).

23. BISA V, 1979, 30 (221).

24. BIRA I, 1979, 7 (110).

25. BIRA II, 1979, 7 (115)

of other faiths towards the Kingdom that is to come. Interreligious dialogue is an ongoing process of common search for mutual understanding and trust, leading us and our fellow pilgrims towards a deeper appreciation of truth—the truth about God and the human person. When various religious groups lay absolute claims to truth aggressive militancy and divisive proselytism follow and, in their wake, bitter religious divisions.”<sup>26</sup> The Christ that we proclaim in Asia cannot be the royal Christ of imperial Christianity but the divine Master who washed the feet of his disciples: the Christ in whom God’s kenosis, was revealed and God’s compassion embodied. The truly Asian Jesus resonates well with the Asian religious psyche and meets the Asian on his/her search for God. “Our journey in the footsteps of Jesus motivates us to join the spiritual pilgrimage of sisters and brothers of Asian religions in pursuit of being one in Divine Life.”<sup>27</sup> In the spiritual journey ‘we should avoid all sorts of exclusive claims and cultural superiority both of which would betray the message of the divine kenosis.’<sup>28</sup> “Triumphalism and displays of pomp and human power do not witness to the abnegation of Jesus on the Cross; it is often from our weakness that God’s love as life-giving grace is more clearly made manifest.”<sup>29</sup> This is the Christology that evolves through the statements of the FABC.

### Spirit of God as the Liberative Power

The Spirit of God revealed in Christ is at work in the hearts of all human persons, in the culture of all communities. The entire world, the universal history of humanity is the *milieu divin*, the field of the transforming work of the Spirit. We have experienced the unique manifestation of this Spirit in Jesus the Christ, and hence we acknowledge the power and presence of the Spirit of Christ in all cultures and religions. Asian bishops take a pneumatological perspective on the plurality of religions: “The Holy Spirit is at work both in the Church and beyond its visible boundaries, since the Spirit acts in freedom and his action cannot be reduced to persons, traditions, institutions or problems of relationships.”<sup>30</sup> “The Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church; his ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one

26. BIRA IV/4, 1987, 2 (300)

27. FEISA I, 1994, 7.2.1.

29. FABC 1995, 14.3.

28. FEISA I '94, 7.4.2.

30. BIRA IV/1, '84, 10 (249).

can dictate the direction of his grace."<sup>31</sup> And more clearly it is affirmed: "It is an inescapable truth that God's Spirit is at work in all religious traditions."<sup>32</sup> With a keen sensitivity to the religious psyche of Asians the bishops acknowledge: 'The religious traditions of Asia are expressions of the universal action of God's Spirit in them.'<sup>33</sup> They are not speaking about the divine Spirit other than the Holy Spirit. "It is the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active among all peoples before incarnation and is active among the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today."<sup>34</sup> Hence faith in Christ motivates us to perceive the presence of the Spirit of Christ in the religious traditions and cultural forms of all peoples. Basically this means 'an attitude of openness to the mystery of God's saving action in history.'<sup>35</sup> "We join other believers on the pilgrimage beyond, celebrating our interdependence and our oneness before the ever-greater Mystery."<sup>36</sup> We can truly walk with others with 'fearlessness because the Spirit is leading us'.<sup>37</sup> "Journeying with one another in quest of integral liberation and salvation is the basic dynamics of Asian religions."<sup>38</sup> Alertness to the divine Spirit is a characteristic element of the Asian spiritual sensitivity. It permeates the primal religions as well as the Scriptural religions of Asia and makes the Asian people tolerant to believers of other religions.

### Kingdom of God as the Universal Horizon

What the divine Spirit brings about is the Kingdom of God. We Christians have perceived the emergence of the Kingdom of God in and through Jesus the Christ. Faith in Christ is an invitation to recognise the evolution of the Kingdom of God also in the communities of those who do not explicitly believe in Christ and in the secular movements as well. Kingdom of God is a reality that cannot be restricted to particular religions or identified with the Church; it is within and beyond all religions. The Asian bishops understand the Kingdom of God as the salvific reality

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31. BIRA II, '79, 12 (115); BIRA IV/2, '85, 8.5 (253); BIRA IV/3, '86, 2 (258)

32. BIRA IV/12, '91, 7 (326).

33. Theological Consultation '91, 43, (344).

34. BIRA IV/3, '86, 6 (259).

35. BIRA III, '82, 6 (120).

36. BIRA IV/12, '91, 40 (331).

37. BIRA III, '82, 6 (120).

38. FEISA, I, 1994 7.1.1.



unto which the entire history is moving and in which all religions meet. "The core of Christ's proclamation is the Kingdom of God",<sup>39</sup> and hence 'the Church exists in and for the Kingdom'.<sup>40</sup> Church is an 'instrument'<sup>41</sup> and a 'sign' and 'symbol' of the Kingdom of God.<sup>42</sup> But 'the Kingdom of God is far wider than the Church's boundaries'.<sup>43</sup> The Asian bishops 'acknowledge the Kingdom at work in socio-political situations and in cultural and religious traditions of Asia'<sup>44</sup> 'and in the secular movements' as well.<sup>45</sup> Hence 'men and women of faith and goodwill, strengthened by the experience of common humanity, will have to join in the building of God's Kingdom, whose completion God alone can bring about'.<sup>46</sup> This epochal vocation demands that 'the Church moves out of herself and into fellowship with all people of goodwill as an effective way to work for the Kingdom which Christ proclaimed'.<sup>47</sup> Thus the Church would 'call human persons to the values of the Kingdom of God' with the hope that all would 'turn anew to God's Kingdom'.<sup>48</sup> Kingdom of God offers the *raison d'être* of Christian presence in Asia. Kingdom of God becomes the meeting point of religions on this continent.

### Church as the Sign-community

FABC looks at the Church not as a closed religious community that exists as a minority community in most of the Asian countries. Church is rather an 'instrument' and 'sign' of the Kingdom of God.<sup>49</sup> The presence of the christian community articulates the Kingdom of God that is evolving in all realms of human life under the impact of the divine Spirit manifest in Christ. In this sense 'Church is the visible sign of the presence of Jesus Christ and his Spirit in the world'.<sup>50</sup> This however is not a reason for the Church to elevate itself above other religions or to absolutise itself in the universal spiritual evolution of humanity. The unique mission of the Church is to be seen in its being integrated with the universal process of the emergence of the Kingdom

39. BIRA IV/10, '88, 6 (314).

40. BIRA IV/2, '85, 8.1 (252).

41. Ibid, 8.2. [252]

42. Ibid, 11 (253)

43. Ibid, 8.1 (252).

44. Theological Consultation, '91, 39 (344).

45. BIRA IV/1, '84, 10 (249).

46. Ibid, 2, '85, 15 (255).

47. BIRA IV/3 '86, 5 (259). cfr. J. Dupuis S. J., FABC Focus on the

Church's Evangelizing Mission in Asia Today, *Vidyajyoti*, '92, 449-68.

48. BIRA II, '79, 13 (115).

49. Id., IV/2, '85, 8.1; 11 (252-3).

50. BIMA II, '80, 14 (101).

of God. "This age of journeying with sisters and brothers of Asian religions is a privileged moment (kairos) for the Church to return to its original call."<sup>51</sup> It is a vocation received in grace and a responsibility to evolve into the Church of Christ. "We who are of the Church are mindful of our election as the sacramental manifestation of the salvific will of God, and see our relationship to other religions and believers in the light of this mystery."<sup>52</sup> Since 'the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church'<sup>53</sup> we are called to be alert to 'the Spirit that blows where it wills', to listen constantly to what the Spirit is telling the Church (Rev. 3: 13). Christian existence is therefore constitutively dialogical. In unambiguous terms the Asian bishops clarify the nature of the Church in Asia: "Church is called to be a community of dialogue; dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church."<sup>54</sup> "Church is a community in pilgrimage journeying with peoples of other faiths towards the Kingdom of God."<sup>55</sup> In this process the Church itself is being 'enriched' by the Word of God vibrant in other religions<sup>56</sup> and 'transformed' by the Spirit of God active in other religions.<sup>57</sup> Christians in their evangelizing work 'is being evangelized by their partners in dialogue'.<sup>58</sup> Thus the Church gets deeply 'inculturated' on this spiritually fertile soil of Asia until it becomes 'not simply a Church in Asia, but a Church of Asia'.<sup>59</sup>

### Dialogue as the 'New Way'

A spiritual community in Asia has to be a community of seekers. This great continent has witnessed thousands of seekers who relentlessly sought the Ultimate, the Divine. We Asians are basically spiritual pilgrims. It is with a sensitivity to this dimension of the Asian religious psyche that the bishops define the Church as a 'pilgrim community'<sup>60</sup> *en route* with believers of other religions. Two significant terms describe the relationship of Christians with others in the process: dialogue and evangelization. As co-pilgrims we *dialogue* with others in pursuit of the inexhaustible mystery of the Divine and we share with others our experience of God in and

51. FEISA I, '94, 7.5.1.

52. BIRA I, '79, 7 (110).

54. Id., IV/12, '91, 48 [332].

56. Id., 2, '85, 8.5. [253].

58. Id., II, '79, 11 [115].

60. Id., 4, '87, 2 [300]; Id., III, '82, 3 [120]; Id., IV/6, '87, 6 [304].

53. Ibid, II, '79, 12 (115).

55. Id., 4, '87, 2 [300]

57. Id., 12, '91, 50 [333].

59. Id., IV/12, '91, 50 [333].

through Jesus Christ (*evangelization*). FABC has a very pertinent formula on the integral unity of these two dimensions of mission: "As God's pilgrim people the Church shares the longings and desires of all to come closer to the Father, while as God's eschatological people it announces Jesus Christ and his Good News to all."<sup>61</sup> Evangelization without dialogue may take the forms of aggressive proselytization, and dialogue without evangelization would lack integrity and credibility. Both are to be seen as mutually 'complementary' aspects of the *one* integral mission of the Church. Bishops make it clear that dialogue is 'an integral part of evangelization,'<sup>62</sup> 'intrinsic to the very life of the Church',<sup>63</sup> 'essential mode of all evangelization'<sup>64</sup> and 'a true expression of the Church's evangelizing action'.<sup>65</sup> In these words of the Asian bishops one finds an echo of the prophetic statement of Pope Paul VI: 'Dialogue is the new way of being Church'.<sup>66</sup> With Pope John Paul II bishops uphold that 'interreligious dialogue is a work desired by God'.<sup>67</sup> Hence 'sincere and authentic dialogue does not have for its objective the conversion of the other; for conversion depends solely on God's internal call and the person's free decision'.<sup>68</sup> In true dialogue 'each one speaks of those things which are deepest and most meaningful'<sup>69</sup> 'without intending to convert any of the partners to the other's religion'.<sup>70</sup> "Dialogue aimed at 'converting' the other to one's own religious faith and tradition is dishonest and unethical; it is not the way of harmony."<sup>71</sup> "Transparency and utter truthfulness demand that there be no 'hidden agenda', that no betrayal or indelicate behaviour trespass upon this sacred ground, that there be no manipulation of any kind."<sup>72</sup> "The otherness of the other should always be respected in the process of dialogue."<sup>73</sup> "We enter as equal partners into the dialogue in a mutuality of sharing and enrichment contributing

61. Id., III, '82, 3 [120].

62. BIMA II, '80, 14 [100].

63. BIRA I, '79, 9 [111].

64. Mission Congress '79, Message, 19 [131]

65. BIMA II, 1980, 14 [101]

66. Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, 63

67. Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 28 April, 1987.

68. BIRA III, 1982, 4 [120]

69. Consultation on Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia, '83, 13 [167]

70. BIRA IV/1, 11 [249].

71. BIRA V/3, 1995, 7

72. BIRA IV/12, 1991, 45 [332]

73. BIRA V/3 1995, 8.4

to mutual growth."<sup>74</sup> The objective of this dialectical interaction between dialogue and evangelization is 'a deeper conversion to the Kingdom of God' which means 'leading the Asian peoples to a fuller communion with God and among themselves, which is the ultimate goal of all evangelization.'<sup>75</sup> With this the Asian Church participates in the vision of Jesus: that all may be one in the Trinitarian unity of life (John 17:21).

### **The Poor as the Meeting-point**

The Asian bishops are well aware of the consequences when they conceive the Church as a pilgrim community. The spiritual pilgrimage of Asian Christians takes place in the midst of 'poverty, ignorance, sickness, injustice and exploitation'.<sup>76</sup> It evolves through the manifold struggles of the Asian peoples with regard to the reassertion of women, awakening of youth, resurgence of the downtrodden, defence of human rights, protection of the environment and integral human development.<sup>77</sup> Dialogue with believers of other religions has to find concrete expression in a creative response to this existential situation of life in Asia; it is the 'dialogue of life where people join together to promote whatever leads to unity, love, truth, justice and peace'.<sup>78</sup> In such liberative movements 'the power of Christ's Spirit is working' because 'the Kingdom of God confronts the forces of injustice, violence and oppression'.<sup>79</sup> "Working with sisters and brothers of other religions in bringing about freedom and justice, peace and harmony means ultimately participating in the divine work of recreating the world, establishing the Kingdom of God in all spheres of life."<sup>80</sup> Hence promotion of justice becomes an integral element of interreligious dialogue.<sup>81</sup> When believers of various religions work together to bring about integral human liberation and environmental harmony they 'discover the creative and redemptive forces in each religion',<sup>82</sup> and 'articulate the liberative and unifying potential of each religion'.<sup>83</sup> Interreligious collaboration thus becomes a revelatory experience: the power and presence of the transforming divine Spirit is unfolded in all realms of life. "In actual practice all this may entail that believers of all

74. BIRA I, '79, 12 [111]

76. FABC '70, 10. [4]

78. BIRA I, '79, 16 [111]

80. FEISA I '94, 7.2.4.

82. BIRA IV/4 '87, 6 [300].

75. Theological Consultation '91, 46 [345]

77. FABC '70, 11 [4] FABC '95, 8.

79. BIRA IV/10 '88, 8 [314]

81. BIRA IV/10, '88, 11 [315]

83. BIRA V/3 '95, 3



religions take up the cause of the least: the oppressed, the exploited and the discriminated minority groups."<sup>84</sup> 'This demands working, not for them merely (in a paternalistic sense), but *with* them, to learn from them their real needs and aspirations.'<sup>85</sup> 'Creative collaboration with believers of other religions helps us to discover the 'face of God turned towards humanity in the crucified Christ' today in the faces of the broken people and in the wounds of the exploited earth.'<sup>86</sup> Concern for the poor is the meeting point of religions; compassion is the hallmark of a religious person.<sup>87</sup> In this the Asian Church resonates well with the primal concern of Jesus (*agape*) and the primordial perception of Asian sages (*karuna*).

### Local community as the Agent of Dialogue

Over the years FABC has developed clear and courageous perspectives on interreligious dialogue. However they are not effectively communicated to the local christian communities and hence the Asian Church has yet a lot to do in order to promote a culture of dialogue. All the FABC seminars and workshops end with concrete pastoral orientations and guidelines. These are mostly related to the formation of christians in understanding the religious beliefs and practices of their neighbours of other communities. It is a fact that we christians have over the centuries built into our psyche prejudices about sisters and brothers of other religions; these can be removed only through a consistent educational process of getting acquainted with the basics of other religions. "Interreligious dialogue calls for a concentrated attention on the spirituality of peoples of other faiths. Understanding and appreciation of it will dispose christians to enter into dialogue with followers of other religions."<sup>88</sup>

Asian bishops are concerned not merely in giving training to a few experts in the field of dialogue, but 'to prepare all the faithful for interreligious dialogue' because 'dialogue is the new way of being Church today'.<sup>89</sup> Hence they 'propose that all Asian Catholics (not only those directly involved in dialogue) be given the possibility to widen and deepen their general knowledge of

84. Id., IV/11, '88, 15 (321); Id., V/2, '94, 8.3. 85. FABC, '74, 20 (15).

86. FEISA I, '94, 7.3.1. 87. BIRA IV/11, '88, 17 (321); FEISA I, '94, 3.1 88; BIRA IV/7, 88, 17.2 (311).

89. BIRA IV/4, '87, 8 [300]. "Each member of the faithful and all christian communities are called to practise dialogue although not always to the same degree or in the same way." Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 57.

Asian faiths and ideologies. Studies of all the Asian religions and movements abound, and it must therefore be the responsibility of parish, diocesan and inter-diocesan pastoral centres, seminaries and Catholic universities, to distill and present to Catholics the knowledge they need, when they need it'.<sup>90</sup>

### Formation of the Laity

Religious formation begins at home. Hence it is important that 'christian parents, catechists and educators should teach their children about God's love for believers of other religions and about the many good and holy values in these religions'.<sup>91</sup> 'Schools could become places where interreligious understanding may be furthered'.<sup>92</sup> 'Conduct attractive and relevant educational programmes in order to make high school and college students be acquainted with the basics of all religions'.<sup>93</sup> Thus a new culture of dialogue and harmony will evolve in the young generation; 'christian institutions like schools could become centres of interreligious dialogue'.<sup>94</sup>

Bishops demand that the catechetical formation in our parishes and schools should make our students sensitive to the religious feelings of believers of other religions. Hence 'basic knowledge about the beliefs and practices of other religions, taken from reliable and objective sources, should form part of Catholic catechetical training'.<sup>95</sup> For this bishops are asked to 'include the interreligious dimension in catechisms, catechetical publications and programmes of religious education among the young, among university and student groups'.<sup>96</sup> Catholic parishes too should foster interreligious understanding and fellowship because 'the prime agent of this new mission in dialogue is the parish'.<sup>97</sup> 'Dialogue brings to the local churches in Asia which are in danger of being ghettos an openness to and integration into the mainstream of cultures. Christians grow in genuine love for their neighbours of other faiths, and the latter learn to love their christian neighbours'.<sup>98</sup> Genuine friendship is the fruit of dialogue,

90. BIRA IV/3, '86 14 (260).

91. Id., II, '79, 17 [116].

92. Id., IV/6, '87, 7.3 (304).

93. Id., V/3 '95, 8.6.

94. Id., IV/16, '87, 7.3. [304].

95. Ibid, II, '79, 17 (116).;

FEISA I, '94. 8.9.2.

96. BIRA I, '79, 18 (112).

97. BIRA IV/12, '91, 15 (328).

98. Mission Congress, 1979, Consensus Paper, III, 2.4.b. (142).

and its matrix as well.<sup>99</sup> Only in this way can 'interreligious dialogue become a reality at the grassroots level of our Churches.'<sup>100</sup>

The recent experience of Base Christian Communities has unearthed 'their vast apostolic potential and the rich promise that they hold'. Bishops believe that they can play 'a creative role in interreligious dialogue'<sup>101</sup> by becoming 'the main agents of the dialogue of life'.<sup>102</sup> In the Asian pluralistic context however this would demand that 'the formation of Base Christian Communities, which are self-reliant, should lead to the formation of Base Human Communities; in this way the Church of Asia can truly become servant of all'.<sup>103</sup> 'It is necessary to organize in every village/township interreligious friendship groups (e.g. solidarity teams, neighbourhood associations, interreligious councils etc.) which promote interpersonal relations and interreligious understanding and cooperation.'<sup>104</sup> In such interreligious local initiatives 'people come together to build human communities based on love'; the power and presence of the divine Spirit can be discerned in them.<sup>105</sup> They become sacramental communities of the Kingdom of God and pave way to a new culture of dialogue and harmony in Asia.

### Formation of Priests and the Religious

Since priests and the religious play a vital role in christian communities they should be helped to develop proper theological perspectives on dialogue and gain practical experience in relating to sisters and brothers of other religions. FABC asks the episcopal conferences 'to develop a formation process for clergy, religious and laity toward the formation of *persons of dialogue*, who would be sensitive to other faiths and persuasions'.<sup>106</sup> For this 'theological basis of interreligious dialogue and courses on religions outside christianity should be included and strengthened in the curriculum of the seminaries and other houses of formation'.<sup>107</sup> Teachers of theology 'must be encouraged to explore ways of relating the christian faith to the wisdom and ways of thinking of

99. BIRA IV/12, 14 [328].

100. BIMA II, '80, 14, (101).

101. BIRA IV/12, '91, 18 [328].

102. Mission Congress 1979, Consensus Paper III, 2.4.e (142).

103. BIRA IV/2, 1985, 12. 3 (254). 104. Id., V/3, '95, 8.5.

105. Id., IV/3 '86, 12 (260).

106. FABC, 1990, 7.3.2.3.1.

107. BIRA IV/6, '87, 7. 2. (304).

peoples of other faiths'.<sup>108</sup> Through their assiduous study and contacts with teachers of other religions it should be made clear that 'irreconcilable theological differences need never be an obstacle to dialogue'.<sup>109</sup> 'Not only seminarians but bishops and clergy as well as lay people should be given opportunities to update themselves at this point.'<sup>110</sup> The purpose of studying the belief systems and values of other religions is not so much to analyse them phenomenologically as to love and respect them, for 'the religious traditions of Asia are expressions of the presence of God's Word and of the universal action of God's Spirit in them'.<sup>111</sup> To walk with others on a spiritual pilgrimage we need to develop a new sensitivity to the divine Spirit and openness to believers of other religions. It is a matter of developing an integral spirituality that demands a *transformation* in the formation process. Bishops perceive this: 'Formation is not so much information about the past but an introduction into new possibilities for the future'.<sup>112</sup> The future of christian presence in Asia offers immense possibilities for interreligious collaboration and fellowship. The religious person of the future will be an interreligious person: rooted in one's own faith but branching off towards the others with generosity and receptivity.

### Dialogue Centres

For the ongoing interreligious formation and collaboration of christians and others the bishops propose to open training centres of contextual relevance in different parts of Asia. 'Realizing the vital importance of dialogue today, the Bishops should consider it as their personal responsibility to set up centres for formation and promotion of dialogue on national and regional levels.'<sup>113</sup> These centres would 'coordinate formation programmes, formulate guidelines for dialogue and prepare programmes for mass media', 'offer courses on Asian religions and on the christian theological perspectives on interreligious relationship' and 'organize programs for actual exposure to the world of other religions'.<sup>114</sup> These 'interdisciplinary and interreligious' programs on the 'teachings and practices' of diverse religions would help

108. Id., IV/7, 1988, 17.1 (311).

109. BIRA II, 1979, 16 (116).

110. Id., IV/6, 1987, 7.2 (304).

111. Theological Consultation, 91, 43 [344].

112. Ibid, 20 [339]

113. BIRA IV/2, 85, 12.5 (254).

114. BIRA IV/2, 1985, 13.



people to 'give up prejudice' and to 'learn mutual respect and appreciation and be ready for mutual inspiration and collaboration'.<sup>115</sup> Such centres should have a pastoral orientation and 'provide the grassroots workers and base human/christian communities with orientation and skills needed for interreligious dialogue, especially in situations of conflict'.<sup>116</sup> A special concern of these centres should be to promote an integral Asian/christian spirituality: 'Interreligious dialogue calls for a concentrated attention on the spirituality of peoples of other faiths. Understanding and appreciation of it will dispose christians to enter into dialogue with followers of other religions.'<sup>117</sup> 'Dialogue demands a deep spirituality' and hence the bishops 'suggest that a network of centres of spirituality be created, where besides study and research, seekers of God and truth of all religious affiliations could meet and share their spiritual experiences'.<sup>118</sup> A concrete Asian form of such an initiative would be the starting of ashrams, where 'a living dialogue with persons of different faiths' will be enlivened by 'contemplative pursuits and an indepth study of the sacred writings of other religions'.<sup>119</sup> 'Creative interreligious dialogue in Asia evolves only out of a contemplative experience that constantly reminds us that the Divine is the Ever-Beyond: *Deus semper major*.'<sup>120</sup>

### Harmony as the Goal

A central theme that evolves in the FABC seminars of the last six years is harmony. The theological commission of FABC has brought out a good document of the theology of harmony, and the recent BIRA seminars were centred on this theme. The Hindu-Christian Dialogue Seminar (BIRA V/3) at New Delhi in 1995 describes with precision what harmony of religions is and thus clarifies the goal of interreligious dialogue:

"*Samanvaya* (harmony) is the spiritual pursuit of the totality of reality in its infinite diversity and radical unity. Since the ultimate ground of being is unity-in-plurality, the divergent forms of reality are perceived in the convergent rhythm that harmonizes them. Harmony evolves by respecting the otherness of the other

115. Ibid, '94, 8,, 2

116. BIRA IV/7, 1988, 17. 3. (311). 117. ibid. 17. 2. (311).

118. Ibid, 16 & 17. 2.

119. BIRA IV/11, 1988, 22. 1. (323); FABC 1978, 54. 4. a (39).

120. FEISA '94, 7.2. 3.

and by acknowledging its significance in relation to the totality. Consequently the unique significance of every religion is gratefully and critically perceived within the context of the universal spiritual evolution of humanity.

Beyond the extremes of inclusivism and exclusivism, pluralism is accepted in resonance with the constitutive plurality of reality. Religions, as they are manifested in history, are complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine mystery, the God-beyond-God. All religions are visions of the divine mystery. No particular religion can raise the claim of being the norm for all others. We religious believers are co-pilgrims, who share intimate spiritual experiences and reflections with one another with concern and compassion, with genuine openness to truth and the freedom of spiritual seekers (*sadhakas*). In this process we become increasingly sensitive to human suffering and collaborate in promoting justice, peace and ecological wholeness ... We walk together on the path of dialogue and service towards harmony as sisters and brothers bound in one Love and drawn by one Divine Truth." (BIRA V/3, '95, 6)

The plurality of religions and the christian response to that will be one of the central themes of the forthcoming Asian Synod. Though this is an existential issue in the Asian christian communities, it evolves as a decisive question in the Church at large. The entire world is becoming pluralistic with regard to religious beliefs and practices. The traditionally christian continents too are facing in close quarters the reality of the plurality of religions. The theological perspectives which evolved over the last twenty five years in the meetings and seminars of FABC show a direction which the Church could take in making its presence relevant in a pluralistic world. The Asian Synod, which is an attempt to 'listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church' cannot ignore these perspectives which were born out of the experience of millions of Asian christians who journey with sisters and brothers of other religions on the Asian soil.

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The texts of the documents of the FABC are taken from Gaudencio B. Rosales and CG Arevalo SJ (ed.) *For all the Peoples of Asia, FABC Documents from '70 to '91*, Quezon, Philippines, Claretian Publications, '92. The page of the citation is indicated in brackets after the reference.

# **The Church's Mission of Love and Service in the Context of Asia's Socio-Economic and Political Realities**

The article suggests, using some of the ideas expressed in the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC 1995, how the coming Asian Synod could be a watershed for a new understanding of the church's mission. Two important points suggested are, one, the need for change in the socio-economic and political field and two, the life of harmony with oneself and with others, Asian bishops look towards creating a community where God-given dignity of persons is recognised, freedom of religions is provided for and state structures guarantee the development of both the individual and the society. By a life of harmony with all people Christians in Asia will truly be Church following the vision of the Kingdom. The writer is the present President of the Indian Theological Association.

To be church in the context of Asian realities is to witness to God's transforming presence among Asia's teeming millions who seek a secure future in their social, economic and political lives. For Christian believers, God's transforming presence is always linked to the Christ event which remains the ultimate point of reference when deciding on the type and mode of transformation. In carrying out her mission authentically, the church truthfully witnesses to the Christ event incarnated in the realities which make up the immensity that is Asia.

It was in 1970, when Pope Paul VI visited the Philippines that he mooted the proposal of a regional association of Asian bishops. In the years that followed, the proposal bore fruit. Asian bishops met together to become aware of the Asian realities, to reflect on them and to initiate appropriate programmes of action. Over the years, papers prepared for the meetings of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) had already indicated ways in which the Church could carry out her mission of love and service in the Asian context.

During January 10-19, 1995, in Manila, the FABC held its Sixth Plenary Assembly. Not only did the assembly issue a final statement but there were many papers prepared mainly by Asian theologians for the participants to reflect on. This article will make use of some of the ideas in those papers in order to suggest how the coming Asian Synod could be a watershed for a new understanding of the Church's mission.

### The Asian Synod

In his apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994), Pope John Paul II indicated his intention to hold an Asian Synod:

Another plan for a continent-wide Synod will concern *Asia*, where the issue of the encounter of Christianity with ancient local cultures and religions is a pressing one. This is a great challenge for evangelization, since religious systems such as Buddhism or Hinduism have a clearly soteriological character. There is also an urgent need for a Synod on the occasion of the Great Jubilee in order to illustrate and explain more fully the truth that Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world, to be clearly distinguished from the founders of other great religions. With sincere esteem, the Church regards the elements of truth found in those religions as a reflection of the Truth which enlightens all men and women. *Ecce natus est nobis Salvator mundi*: in the Year 2000 the proclamation of this truth should resound with renewed power (no. 38).

Later, the Pope set up a pre-synodal Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops for the Special Assembly for Asia. This General Secretariat elicited opinions from the Asian Episcopal Conferences, the departments of the Roman Curia and the Union of Superior Generals so as to decide on a topic for the Asian Synod. The Pope approved the following topic: Jesus Christ the Saviour and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: '... That They May Have Life, and Have It Abundantly' (Jn. 10: 10).<sup>1</sup>

### The Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, 1995

In his paper (FABC 72e, 1995), "The Christian vocation to promote Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, Sean McDonagh comments as follows:

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1. Cf. *Lineamenta*, Synod of Bishops: Special Assembly for Asia, Vatican City, '96, p. iii.



Everyone will agree that during the past decade more and more people have become aware of global and local environmental and development problems. Reports about global warming, ozone depletion, malnutrition and famine figure regularly in the local, national and international media. Often the level of analysis is superficial and there is little attempt to present a comprehensive picture of what is happening to the poor and the earth. Nevertheless, many significant initiatives have been taken at local and international levels to respond to poverty and environmental degradation (p. 64).

Enough is known about the plight of the poor and the ravaging of the earth to say that there must be a change to ensure a better future. It must be a future in which human persons live with dignity and planet earth survives. Sean McDonagh is aware that such change will need the support not only of individuals of good will but of whole societies at an institutional level:

(But) changes on the part of individuals will be of little help, and will probably not endure, unless they are supported by changes at the institutional level. These changes need to take place in the area of education, media, industry, commerce, in short, in all the professions and all aspects of human activity (p. 65).

In the final statement "X. Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life", (FABC Papers, no. 74, 1995, p. 85) the participants of the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly said the following:

At the heart of our vision of life is the Asian *reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred*, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy or victory, in brokenness or wholeness. The deep interiority draws people to experience *harmony and inner peace* and infuses ethics into all of creation.

Two important focal points suggest themselves from the above quotations and both are relevant to the Asian Synod: the first underlines the need for change in the socio-economic and political areas, and the second calls attention to living in harmony with oneself and with others. We shall begin by considering the first point, i. e., the need to change.

### **Change in socio-economic and political areas**

It must be remembered that the Church is asked to witness

to the Christ event in the nitty-gritty of everyday life. Increased industrialization, economic growth and fast-spreading globalization have created tension-ridden and oppressive situations:

Although the majority of our economies are still rural and agricultural, the gross neglect of this sector has a negative and devastating impact on the lives of individuals and communities. The once self-sustaining economies and rural communities, both traditional and tribal, are the most affected ... The depreciation of the rural economy has depressing implications for the future of rural economies. The process of economic globalization is often not attuned to the patterns of social life in many Asian countries, and thus poses a threat to the traditional cosmic world-view and its value system. The predominance of economic interests leads to a dichotomy between economic concerns and religious values, between pure economic development and the human person.<sup>2</sup>

In the search to provide their peoples with a 'good life', some nations in Asia have made economic gain the all-important and chief goal of progress. They have not considered sufficiently that the economic systems which they have taken over have their own dynamics and rhythm and that these have led governments to drastically reduce both personal freedom and concern for the dispossessed and oppressed. In their efforts to capitalize on the economic boom that takes place especially in the urban areas, governments have paid scant attention to the problems that are spawned by these economic systems. Large numbers of persons who are attracted by work opportunities become a migrant population. Their needs for education and for long-term social, psychological and emotional security are often disregarded.

In many parts of Asia, little attention is paid to persons who are reduced to being refugees in their own land. The ever-increasing slum population in most urban cities in India bears witness to this fact. In the interests of Multi-National Corporations (MNC), zones are marked out where social justice legislation and trade unions have no place. In such circumstances, providing quality education to children is neglected, family life is forced to

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2. FABC Papers, No. 75. '95, "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony", A Document of the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. p. 7.

play host to the MNCs' demand for time and production while health and environmental needs are ignored.

In his position paper 'Asia: The Struggle for Life in the Midst of Death and Destruction' (FABC Papers, no. 70), S. Arokiasamy points to the threat to life that such economic policies foster:

Threats to life are not merely confined to individual violations but are structural. They are operative in the economic, political, cultural and religious spheres. The structures of injustice, violence and ideologies of death create a culture of death. In the Asian heritage, reverence for life and *karuna* and *jeeva-karunya* (compassion for life) are precious values... The models of development and the structures of governance in many of our Asian countries, marked by elitism, liberalism and the power of vested interests, do not protect the life of the majority who struggle for life. If the concern for human life is not based on the bedrock of the intrinsic dignity and value of all human life from conception to death, it easily slides into a libertarian and utilitarian calculus which justifies abortion on demand, euthanasia and the suffering of the poor as inevitable in the progress of a nation (p. 18).

In some of the Asian countries, control of the body politic is exercised by politicians in government who in the name of internal security pass laws that severely restrict the development of people and their freedom of movement. Such governments view with suspicion any attempt to raise questions of violation of human rights and social activism. Law enforcing agencies are quick to discover the presence and activities of socially committed activists. But they have not been equally alert in applying the law to corrupt government officials and to those politicians who have helped themselves to the tax-payer's money. At times, government expects the church to keep religion within the walls of its churches and to support the existing public order that prevails, unquestioningly.

The call for social change and justice, for respect of human rights and democratic representation, is declared to be no business at all for religious persons and institutions... The prophetic critical function these [liberation] theologians claim to exercise is seen by the governments as disturbing the peaceful and harmonious relationship between the government and institutionalized religions. In their view, the task

of religions and Churches is to strengthen the existing social order and to concentrate on fulfilling their religious duties of worshipping God and praying for the welfare of the community.<sup>3</sup>

Evidently, the church is challenged to witness to the presence of God in Asia. But will her plan of action follow those of past ages when the founding of ecclesial communities (the planting of the church) was a primary objective in her mission *ad gentes*? Will her missionary endeavour take the form of creating parallel, if not opposing, structures in an effort to instill moral and Christian values in a people? Will her need for self-understanding show itself in distancing herself from other religions and faith communities even though they uphold and cultivate human rights and dignity? The statement of the Asian bishops in their final statement at the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC suggests that they were seized of the need to formulate the mission of the church in a new way. The new formulation would be characterised by the term 'harmony'.

### Harmony in the Asian Christian Context

The Asian bishops look to creating a community in which the God-given dignity of persons is recognized, where freedom of religion is provided for, and where the structures of the state guarantee the development of the individual and society in the social, economic and political areas. Such a community is not envisaged as separate, parallel and self-sufficient but as the leaven in the dough, the conscience in society as a whole, a single consciousness and common purpose uniting an entire continent.

In the rich diversity of ancient Asian cultures and faiths is a vision of *unity in diversity, a communion of life* among diverse peoples. In this context we seek to become persons of dialogue.

Ours is a vision of *holistic life*, life that is achieved and entrusted to every person and every community of persons, regardless of gender, creed or culture, class or colour. It is the fruit of integral development, the authentic development of the whole person and of every person.

We envision a life *with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion* for the multitudes, especially for the poor and

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3. FABC Papers, no. 75, '90, p. 9.



the needy. It is a life of *solidarity* with every form of life and of *sensitive care* for all the earth. It is thus a life that unites us Asians among ourselves and with the whole of creation into one community for life.

For us to live is to live with integrity and dignity, peace and justice, in freedom and participation, in mutuality and complementarity. It is to live in simplicity and friendship.<sup>4</sup>

The statement of the Asian bishops raises questions about certain pronouncements made earlier, at the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, held in Bandung, Indonesia, July 17-27, 1990. At that meeting, Cardinal Jozef Tomko, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, said:

... there is the question of the challenge of evangelizing the immense continent of Asia which the Church here faces. It is the challenge of Christian mission to Asia, the challenge of proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Savior of all, and the gathering together of believing communities of Christian disciples.<sup>5</sup>

While making reference to Vatican II documents, Cardinal Tomko pointed out that 'the Son of God has come for the salvation and redemption even of non-Christians and their religions, notwithstanding the fact that nearly all these religions already existed.'<sup>6</sup> Further, membership in the Church is to be understood as the chief missionary imperative:

(And) to baptize, as we well know, means to be inserted into the mystical Christ, into the Church of Christ. To bring someone to the faith, to baptism, into the Church, is unique primary activity. It is the mandate of the Lord and our inseparable mission.

Therefore, one cannot justify theological theories that, with the excuse of not falling into 'ecclesiocentrism', do away with the Church, baptism, conversion, and terminate with abandoning the clear proclamation of Jesus Christ, Son of God Incarnate for the salvation of all.<sup>7</sup>

It must be admitted that in his inaugural address at the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC in 1995, the words of Cardinal Tomko

4. FABC Papers, no. 74, p. 85.

5. Refer FABC Papers no. 59, IV. "Christian Mission in Asia Today", Inaugural Address by Cardinal Jozef Tomko, p. 11.

6. Ibid, p. 18,

7. Ibid, p. 19.

were more nuanced. He cautioned the Asian churches against being so exclusively involved in distributing ordinary bread that they would forget to offer the bread of life. The danger of this taking place can be conceded. Still, the categories used to speak of the evangelical mission of the Asian churches do not include those which highlight the Christian understanding (and its theological consequences) that human persons (including those belonging to the religions of Asia) have a divinely-given vocation that is not contingent on their being received into the Catholic church. They do not show sufficient awareness of the fact that the proclamation of Jesus Christ as it was done by the traditional (colonial) missionary tends to be a counter-sign to the people of Asia. Finally, they do not seem to reflect the basic intuitions present in the Vatican II texts of *Lumen Gentium* 16, *Nostra Aetate* 2, and *Ad Gentes* 2 which offer a solid point of departure for contemporary missiology and invite us to look at other religions with genuine appreciation and with gratitude to God.

An article by Domenico Colombo, P. I. M. E., supports the line of thinking set out by Cardinal Tomko. He takes issue with a number of Asian theologians who are seen as opting for a Kingdom-based proclamation rather than one based on Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

In November 1992, the Asian Congress on Evangelization "People Everywhere: Open the Door to Christ!" was held in Manila. A talk (VI. A Spirituality for Evangelization) by Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa argued for the necessity of Christianity against the deficiency of other religions:

From the religious point of view, Asia is still at the point where the whole ancient religious world was when Jesus came.

From the Asiatic religions, therefore, a silent appeal to Christ rises, which the Asian Churches must increasingly endeavor to respond to.<sup>9</sup>

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8. FABC Papers, No. 62, p. 26. Originally published in *Mondo e Missione*, with the title "Asia il Vangelo Dimezzato", November, '90. The English translation has been provided by the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Some editorial changes have been made in the original translation.

9. FABC Papers, no. 66, pp. 38 & 40.

If in Vatican II, the Catholic church has finally begun to correctly understand, respect and acknowledge other religions, it is because her a-priori presumptions of past centuries have given way to the liberating force of experience. Christians who lived with those of other faith persuasions were able to recognize the experience of God in their attitude to others, their life of prayer and their actions. Being open to and understanding God experience in the religions of others will create new perspectives from which we interact with those of other faiths.

The church must be alive to movements which support values to which she herself is committed. She must help in forming community with people who make up these movements not because she can structure and exercise a control over them but because she recognizes that the Spirit is at work in the hearts of all who strive for the total liberation and development of people. She will discover common ground for forming community with others not by comparing her doctrinal formulations with those of other religions but by participating in a praxis that is shared by people of all faiths. Such a praxis will effect a continual conversion which, in turn, will bring about conviction, and such conviction will find expression in a firm commitment to God's people in the Asian context.

There are governments and groups which profess belief in human rights and recognize the rightful place of religion. Such belief can be seen in the *Pancasila* (Five Principles).<sup>10</sup> In India, a Gandhian way of life including *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* would reflect values which are present in the gospel message. The church must join hands with groups professing such ideologies.

Finally, pluralism is a fact of life in Asia. The church can see it as a gift of God and as a sign that creativity exists among the different Asian peoples. In the midst of such pluralism: social economic and political, a new method of doing theology is indicated. Such a theology follows "a logic that does not operate on the principle of contradiction and exclusion (either/or), but of identity and inclusion (both/and)".<sup>11</sup> It is a theology of harmony.

10. FABC Papers, no. 75, 1995, p. 17, "(1) belief in one Supreme God; (2) sovereignty of the people, (3) deliberation to arrive at consensus; (4) humanitarianism; and (5) social justice..."

11. FABC Papers, 57e, "The Church and Pluralism in the Asia of the 1990s" by Michael Amaladoss S. J., 1990, p.9.

A theology of harmony is not a finished product; it is a process that must be carried on in dialogue with persons and groupings of different faith persuasions. The Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC comments on a theology of harmony as follows:

It is (rather) a tentative beginning and an invitation to all to work out a theology of harmony, and a commitment to action in the context of their own national and local situations. At the same time we realize that the promotion of harmony and commitment to action is not the preserve of the small Christian community of Asia. It is a common task, and we invite our brothers and sisters of all the different religious and cultural traditions of Asia to join us in this effort to bring human society and the cosmos, with each of us men and women and all other beings, into the Ultimate Harmony.<sup>12</sup>

If the theology of harmony is actively pursued by those who participate in the Asian Synod there is reason to hope that we shall enter a new era when Christians in Asia will truly be church because they have followed the vision of the Kingdom that Jesus offered in his words and deeds, signs and wonders (DV 4).

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12. FABC Papers no. 75, 1996, p. 66.



# **Asian Jesus:**

## **The Relevance of Jesus Christ in the Asian World of Religious Pluralism**

The author is Professor emeritus of Philosophy of Fordham University and Professor of Theology in Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram. He starts with the affirmation that the reason why Christians are still a tiny minority in Asia should be sought in the way Jesus Christ is presented and not in the person and message of Jesus. The main thrust of the article is towards explaining the differences between the Western and Asian approaches to and outlooks on the Divine. Jesus Christ, Son of God and God's gift to humankind invites all to share his divine sonship. He should never be presented to the Asian people in the guise of Greek conceptualization or as part of an ideology competing with other religions, if he is not to have an alien look in Asia.

The Christian missionary effort in Asia through the last twenty centuries to preach Christ has not been a resounding success. While Europe and the rest of the West as a whole embraced Christianity in the very first centuries, Christians in Asia even today constitute hardly two percent of the population! This naturally raises questions about the relevance of Jesus to the Asian world.

But the simple fact is that Jesus, a Jewish carpenter from the obscure town of Nazareth, was no more relevant to the fashionable world of the first century Greece and Rome than to the deeply religious atmosphere of Asia which welcomed with open arms Buddha, Confucius and Mohammed. As documentary evidence shows within twenty years of Jesus' death, there were sizable communities of believers in Jerusalem, Antioch, Damascus, Thessalonica and other far flung cities that venerated him as the Son of God and Saviour of humanity. Hence the reason for the absence of Jesus in Asia should be sought more in the way he was presented here than in his person and message.

One should not, however, lose sight of the historical and sociological factors that were integral to the realization of the divine plan of salvation in humanity. While the immediate disciples of Jesus who saw the movement started by their Master as a reform within Judaism, were rather reluctant to preach it outside their ethnic confines, the majority of early converts to Christianity happened to be non-Jewish Greeks. The impressive personality of the Prophet, the homeless wandering life style already popularized by the Cynic ascetics and adopted by Jesus and his disciples, and the presence of reform-oriented and receptive Essence communities, presented Christianity with the dynamism of a genuine Greek movement. The early preachers of the Christian Gospel in the Greek world like Paul and Luke were forced to adopt the philosophical thought pattern and style of spirituality of the Greeks, taking care, however to maintain the Jewish core of Christian teaching. This assimilation with the thought and mentality of the Graeco-Roman world enabled the Church to convert the whole of Europe and North Africa in a few centuries. Conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity politicized the Church and speeded up conversions. Christianity became a world religion and gained a well structured theology solidly based on the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.

## **I. The Western Contextualization of Christology**

What happened in this passing of Christianity from the Palestinian Judaic background to the Greek world was a contextualization of the image of Christ. As the missionary discourses of the Acts of the Apostles clearly show, the divinity of Christ was not the focus of the early Christian understanding of the salvation wrought by Jesus. It was principally the work of the Father, the one God of the Bible, who in fulfillment of his promise of salvation to humanity sent Jesus as a new Moses, a new David and a new Solomon to lead humanity in the faithful carrying out of the Covenant with Yahweh. For the Jews whose theological thinking attained a certain sophistication during the Babylonian captivity, the basic problem was the fight between Good and Evil, the good God and Satan. The defeat of the Jews at the hands of the Babylonian kings and the subsequent Babylonian captivity were perceived as the result of the failure of the Judaic kings who came after David to follow faithfully the

Covenant with Yahweh. So the Jewish prophets were leading the people in the hope of a restoration of kingship through a new king who would be in the image of David. When that hope failed to materialize the High Priest himself was expected to be the ideal king. The Messiah was expected to combine the ideals of kingship and priesthood. But the Jewish leadership opted to side with the Prince of the World and crucified the God-sent leader. By itself the death of Jesus was not perceived as salvific but only as the crime of the Jews. God, however, was not to be thwarted in his plan for humanity. He raised Jesus from the dead and made him Son and Saviour, the ideal Israel and its leader. There is a new order of things established with Jesus as its centre. There is no other name given to humans to glory in except the name of Jesus. The plan of the Father is to reorganize all things under Jesus, the new head, in the place of Adam who fell by the temptation of Satan.

But the basic religious problem for the Greeks was not the fight between Good and Evil, but rather the infinite distance between God and the material world, part of which was the human being. In accommodating the Palestinian idea of the broad notion of the "Son of God" to the demands of Greek conceptualist thinking, Christian thought ran into great many difficulties. There was need of a mediator, and, there had to be someone to placate God who like the Olympian deities would be really offended by human sins and angry at the humans. The answer to this problem was a mediator who would bridge the infinite gulf. This mediator had to be one with God in divinity and with humans by birth in the race of Adam. If Jesus were not really God we cannot be divinised and if he did not assume all parts of the human including rational soul and body the wounded nature of the human would not be fully healed. This was how the theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries argued against Arians, Appollinarians and Nestorians to safeguard the divinity and humanity of the one Mediator between God and human beings. Though every effort was made to explain the divinity of the Son of God within the framework of strict Jewish monotheism, the tendency was to picture Jesus as the Pantokrator, a Creator-God, a sort of Demiurge by the side of the Supreme Being!

Though Jesus came forth from the Father who loved the world so much as to give for its sake his own beloved Son, the

image of the Servant of God in Isaiah was used to ascribe to Jesus the figure of an innocent mediator suffering and dying for the sake of the guilty. Though the Old Testament clearly states that the bloody sacrifice had specific meaning because blood was the symbol of life, Christ's suffering and death were presented as expiatory because it offered adequate satisfaction for the offended majesty of God. Another important drawback of Greek thinking was that it did not have a proper place for myth and legend as presented in the Bible. Between mere fantasy which was falsehood and truth there was no middle position. So we find the Greek Fathers taking in a very literal sense Biblical narratives like the six days of creation, and the sin of the First Parents by eating the forbidden fruit, and the flood. The details of the Infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are taken as actual miraculous events and facts, though Biblical scholarship generally recognizes that the evangelists were not writing chronicles of events basing themselves on extant records and documents, but rather writing a second stage christology, making the origins of the widely acknowledged Prophet and Saviour agree with his later glory.

Another aspect of the Greek contextualization of Christianity is that in it Jesus becomes part of an ideology or creed to be confessed than a person to be encountered and experienced. The Greek identification of being and truth led to the Scholastic reduction of all divine revelation to propositional truths. The ecclesiastical Magisterium itself became a sort of Delphic Oracle leaving little place for the active participation of the "faith-sense" of the people in search of God's will in today's world. In fact with the Protestant Revolution there arose a deep suspicion of the layman's capacity to give witness to his faith, and the "Church" became identified with the clerical establishment. The great many condemnations and even dire punishments meted out down the centuries to innocent people like Nestorius, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Martin Luther, which today people generally recognize as gross mistakes, should be attributed to this absolutization of certain doctrinal formulations and ideologies. One ideology is incompatible with another ideology. So Western Christians were mostly ignorant of other religions and extremely intolerant of their followers especially Jews and Muslims.

Creeds were often tools of oppression. During the Crusades it is alleged that the Christian creed was read out to surrendering



Muslims and those who did not immediately accept it and become Christians were judged apostates and punished as such. The same method was used by the Spanish conquistadores in the New World for dealing with the natives and great many Indians were put to death as apostates for refusing to become Christians. Cardinal Cajetan hearing about it from his confreres who had accompanied the settlers is said to have characterised the method as "theologia rapinae", a theology of plunder. Though these were abuses and condemned as such by ecclesiastical authorities, the justification for such outrageous actions came from Greek absolutism. The traditional exclusivist approach to religions according to which Christianity alone is true and all others erroneous if not down right works of the devil, is a typically Greek approach to truth.

To what extremes this absolutization of certain conceptual interpretations and the Greek cult of the idea can go is best exemplified in the recent excommunication of Tissa Balasurya, because he would not sign a creed specially made for him by the Roman curia. It has all the appearance of the Kafkaic drama: His case is tried in secret without giving him a hearing, and he is publicly thrown out of the communion of the Church without a hint of what point of faith, which forms the basis of all ecclesial communion, he contumaciously denied. Cardinal Ratzinger and the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in their several explanations have argued that Balasurya has deviated from the traditional methodology and the traditional formulations of the Magisterium! Naturally the question arises what the object of our faith is: Is it the particular Greek conceptualist methodology of the Roman curia and its formulations or the self-revealing personality of our Lord and Saviour!

But the irony is that the Indian theologians who rushed to the defense of Tissa Balasurya have blindly accepted the same rigid conceptual framework. Besides protesting against the obvious lack of proper procedure from the part of the curial officials, they are also defending the conceptual absolutism of the empirical sciences as well as of other religions. If Balasurya is accused of adopting Marxist sociological interpretations, many Indian theologians argue that the contextualization of Christian theology is impossible if one does not accept the absolute value of the different

religious and cultural thinking of Indian religions. A conclusion taken for granted by many is that each religion is salvific for its followers. So imposing Jesus Christ as the one Saviour of humanity on followers of other religions would be a remnant of colonialism since other religions too have their own teachers and saviours. Some even argued that a genuine Indian Church should have its own faith system derived not solely from the Christian Bible but also with elements from Hinduism, Buddhism, tribal religions and the like. If Western faith formulation is absolute and valid for Western Christians, Indian Christians should have their own creed of equal validity!

Behind the above kind of reasoning is the attitude of scientism which pretended that scientific formulae were the last word on any issue. Today scientism is discredited and discarded. Indian theologians who argued that the religious systems of Hindus and Buddhists should be given equal validity with Western Christian theology thought that they were doing a favour to these Indian religions. It was also the supposition of Hans Kung and other Western Christian thinkers who proposed in the World Parliament of Religions, Chicago, August-September 1993, a "Global Ethic" drawing together the core values and immutable principles of all religions as if they all followed the same conceptual system of reasoning. But such efforts only distort other religions, putting them all in the straight jacket of Western thinking. The thought patterns are radically different. If Greek and Western thinking emphasized the formal cause and "what" of things, the Hebrews concentrated on the efficient cause, the Creator of heaven and earth. Eastern religions have generally placed the stress on the material cause and the maternal womb from which all things emerged. One cannot put them all into the same conceptual framework without distorting them.

As Sri Sankaracharya explained since the Divine is an existent reality the only way of reaching it is through *anubhava*, experience, just as a post standing out there cannot be grasped through personal opinions like "it is a man or something else" but only through direct perception as a post. Scripture, inference, implication and other means of right knowledge are only means leading to direct realization. Every concept is a modification, our picture of the thing out there.

## II. The Asian Approach to God

Granted God exists, that God cannot but be a reality to the atheist, and if Jesus is the one Saviour of humanity he is relevant for every human being, also for those who have never heard about him. Hence any method of interpretation should be aimed at putting people in touch with God and Jesus. Jesus as the Son of God become human in the fullness of time belongs equally to all human beings and not solely to card-carrying Christians, just as Buddha, Krishna and Mohammed belong to the one religious history of humanity and to all human beings.

The basic fact here is that the specific questions by which the Palestinians of Jesus' time and the Greeks approached and discovered Jesus, are not relevant to Asia, and that actually they have lost their meaning for most of the world today. The never-ending struggle between good and evil and the infinite distance between the transcendent world of the Spirit and the material world of actual experience have only an academic interest for most people. Hence approaching other religions as rival ideologies is an anachronism!

The basic problem all Indian religions came to grip with is that of human bondage arising out of ignorance and suffering. The present world also finds the focus of attention in the lived experience of overpopulation and poverty and the struggle of nations to grab the fast depleting resources of nature. It is to the pain and struggle of lived experience that the different Indian religions tried to find an answer. They found the Divine not as the transcendent up there, but as the meaning of human life itself. In the ancient Samkhya philosophy the solution to human suffering produced by the evolutions of the *gunas* of Prakrti was the *Purusha*, the pure Spirit realized in its isolation; a pure witness untouched by matter. Yoga envisaged a number of individual *Purushas* affected by matter, with *Iswara* as a special kind of *Purusha*. Buddhism found this liberation from entanglements in the material world in the person of Buddha, the illumined one. In Hinduism the Divine is perceived as the condition before both being and non-being, the maternal womb from which all things evolved. God is the ultimate meaning of human existence, the one-alone-without a second. For Advaitic thought the only escape from this world of false experience of superimposing the modifications of

the non-self on the Self and the immutable self on the non-self is recognizing the Divine as the one real self. The only authentic religious experience is to realize the Divine as one's ultimate meaning, that from which is the origin, sustenance and ultimate meaning of one's whole being.

### 1. Jesus is the object of faith

In Christianity too the unique contribution of Jesus is his revealing to humanity the authentic meaning of the human existence. The Son of God became a human being to reveal precisely not the secrets of the divinity but the secret of being authentically human. Just like creation and other divine acts Incarnation is not a change in the divinity nor in the divine persons but in the human nature assumed by the Son of God. Basically it is a question of how Jesus of Nazareth attained the consciousness "I am the Son of God"; "Father and I are one"; "Before Abraham was I am". The disciples attained their christian faith when they realized that their Master was not an ordinary rabbi, but "the Son of the living God".

Here Christianity and other religions are basically united in their experience of faith. Faith is the free gift of God to all his children. The different religions show the different ways in which that faith is interpreted and made relevant to life. If Islam interpreted faith as 'Shari'ah', the obedient acceptance of the laws of God, for Israel it was fidelity to the Covenant which God made with the human. For Samkhya and Buddhism faith demanded a leap in the dark taking one's whole being in hand while recognizing the fickle and transitory character of this worldly existence. Vedanta places the stress on the realization that God alone is one's authentic Self, and that bodily existence has only a practical value for the use of going beyond it. The "Abba" experience of Jesus that God is the Father and himself the unique Son, adds a new dimension. It tells that by sharing in the divine sonship of the one Son all can become sons and daughters and make this world itself God's World and Kingdom. All these different ways of looking at faith are not mutually exclusive ideologies but complementary ways of understanding life and reality open to all human beings.

But the important point is that they are not all the same but provide radically different options in relating the God-experience



of faith to life. While Judaism and Islam emphasise rectitude of life in obedience to the laws of God, Buddhism places the accent on renunciation pointing out the emptiness of all things. As the novel *Siddhartha* of Herman Hesse shows, after one passes the human goals of wealth, pleasure and righteous living, the ultimate ideal is of the Ferryman, the image of Buddha who persuades people to leave this life of misery and head for the unknown world beyond. The Hindu emphasis is on the fact that the ultimate goal of man is already present in his own inner authentic self. But Christianity emphasises another creative dimension of faith namely human's, creative task in this world to make it God's World hospitable to all God's children. That the Son of God who became a human being should enjoin "Love one another as I have loved you", "Love your neighbour as yourself", "Do unto others as you will have them do unto you", and "Love your neighbour as yourself", reveals man's basic relationship with God: that God is not a distant and remote being, but the gracious Father who loves the World so much as to give his only Son for its sake. What Jesus is revealing is not another religion but the basic dimension of all religious faith. One cannot profess to love the God one does not see and yet hate the neighbour, God's own child one sees. It is not a question of choosing one or other dimension of faith presented by different religions, but its deepest and comprehensive dimension that includes both love of God and love of neighbour.

## 2. Experience of the Risen Lord

But the compelling force of religion comes from experience. Nobody can be obligated to follow the tenets of a religion by mere outside force or external pressure. The moving force of human life is the will, and it is the faculty of good which alone can compel it. Faith itself is the realization that something belongs to one's ultimate good. According to the Upanishads it is the fifth fire that transforms everything to transcendental level. As Nagasena states in the *Milindapurana* it is the magic ring that removes all mud from a turbid river and presents crystal clear water for the King to drink. Or it is the total vision with which at the guide's word one takes one's whole being in hand and leaps in the dark over mountain brook flooded by torrented rain to reach the opposite bank of safety. It is the substance of things we hope for. But there are two poles for this experience. One is the inner

pole of the divine Spirit dwelling in the heart of every being, and the other the outside pole of the ideal human perfection to which each one is called. Every religion in some manner or other tries to indicate these two poles of faith experience. In Hinduism which gives greater emphasis to the inner pole, the Atman is seen as the ground of one's being and the Self of one's own self. The outer pole is Vishnu, the God of all avatars, the different stages through which creation moves towards the divine perfection. In Buddhism, however, the inner pole which has less importance is Nirvana, the blowing out of transitory existence and the outer ideal is the personality of Buddhas. Even in Islam the outer pole of faith-experience is Allah the Supreme Merciful, and the inner pole to which Shari'ah is directed is the Word of the Qur'an.

It is in the line of the outer pole of faith-experience that the Risen Jesus has to be perceived. St. Paul tells us in the Epistle to the Galatians how he came to a full understanding of Jesus and his Gospel entirely from his encounter with the Risen Lord on the Road to Damascus. The disciples of Jesus understood the divine personality of Jesus not during their life with him but only after his death when they suddenly realized that he was with them not merely in a bodily manner but in a superior Way passing through walls, appearing suddenly and the like. Thomas insists that he would believe only if he saw and touched him. Even though his wish is satisfied it is clearly stated: "Blessed are those who believed without seeing." This means, a direct and personal experience of Jesus is possible without bodily contact, for example in the community that worships. But the bottom line is that there is no Christian faith without a direct experience of Jesus. Faith is not a matter of reciting the creed but of actually experiencing Jesus in life.

### **3. Christianity as a Call to Sanctity and a Mission to Serve**

Most religions like Buddhism, Judaism and Sikhism did not start as distinct religions but only as reform movements within traditional religions. Only later owing to social and political circumstances did they become separate traditions. Christianity also began as a reform-movement in Judaism, and "Christian" was a nickname the followers of Jesus first were

given in Antioch. Later owing to irreconcilable differences it became a different religion. As Augustine reminded his Christian audience, Christianity as a religion had its beginnings in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve as the first believers. This means Christianity relates itself to other religions not as distinct and competing ideologies. Its basic faith is that there is only one divine plan of salvation embracing the whole of human history, and including all religious leaders like Buddha, Mohammed and Jesus. They belong to all. Hence the only question is what distinctive demand each religious leader makes on all human beings. They are mostly complementary and not contradictory. The communitarian organizations, ritual prescriptions and especially ideological interpretations are all later evolutions which have their own relative importance.

But the principal call of Jesus is the call to sonship. Incarnation is not a change in the divinity but the ontological reality of Jesus' consciousness by which he realizes "I am the Son of God", "Father and I are one", "Before Abraham was I am", "From the Father I proceeded and came." It is in this experience of God as Father that the Son invites all to participate. This does not contradict the Judaic and islamic call to acknowledge one's creatutreliness and obey God's laws, the Buddhist appeal to realize the emptiness of the world and the Hindu effort to realize God as the Self of one's own self. Jesus asks all to understand the privilege offered to all to become free children of God in the one Son. This sonship is not an external label but a real inner transformation effected by the Spirit of God. Hence the call of Christ is essentially the call to sanctity: "Be you perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." It is also an invitation to become interested in the happiness of other people. Faith is a trust to be communicated to others. Hence the Gospel is Good News, that the Son of God has entered human history and there is a new order of things for all human beings.

## Conclusion

Jesus is relevant to Asia as to Europe or any other country. He is God's Son and gift to all human beings inviting all to share in the same divine filiation and fellowship with the Father and the Spirit. He looks alien only when presented in the guise of Greek conceptualization and as part of an ideology competing with other

religions as distinct ideologies. The solution to this rivalry among religious traditions is not at all to reduce them all to the same conceptual framework and treat them all as equals. It is to recognize that Jesus along with Confucius, the Buddha and Mohammed belongs to all human beings in the one religious history. The only relevant approach to them is to see how each of them responds to the basic problem of human bondage, ignorance and suffering. Each of them adds a distinctive dimension to our basic faith-experience. Only through experience can they be approached. What Jesus presents is a call to holiness, to a radical transformation in the Spirit and fellowship with God and other human beings. An approach to other religions as rival and competing ideologies is alien to the Spirit of Asia. They all present distinct dimensions of one's faith.

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## Book Review

**B. Pakem (ed.),** *REGIONALISM IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NORTH-EAST INDIA*, Har-Anand Publications, Delhi, 1993, pp. 346.

This is a work edited by the Vice-chancellor of the North-Eastern Hill University of Shillong, and it brings together thirty papers presented at a seminar held in the department of politics of the same university. As can be expected, the overall theme of regionalism is placed in the context of the experiences of the North-East. The work is structured into five parts.

The first part is dedicated to the study of the theoretical perspectives on the general issue of regionalism. This concept of regionalism may be nebulous but the consequences of it cannot leave anyone indifferent. Admittedly, it is a very important force in contemporary political process. In this part, therefore, the nine different contributions analyze such issues as the influence of regionalism on democratic process, civil liberties, and some of the ideological bases for regionalism. The second part is devoted to the study of the question in terms of the relationship between the centre and states representing different cultures, languages, etc. It grapples, in the process, with the question of national integration, and proposes alternatives to overcome the present-day impasse and bottle-necks to create a harmonious inter-relationship of the region with the identity of nation.

It is a general view that economic disparity coupled with social discrimination is one of the chief causes that foment regionalist tendencies. The third part of the book delves into this particular issue. It analyzes the political economy of the region and studies the relationship between regionalism and the middle-class in the North-East. Besides, it goes into the changes taking place in the tribal society and economy. There is a call to concentrate on regional planning as a way of overcoming the present gross disparities in economic development and exclusive dependence on central planning. Further, there is the need to strengthen

the local economy of the region. As P. M. Passah observes, "by concentrating on regional development, it helps to narrow down regional disparity and thus leads to strengthening national unity and integration. In a multi-national State like India, regional planning is the only means to secure public cooperation in the implementation of plans and thereby bring about balanced regional development of the country" (p. 247).

In the fourth part, the focus is more directly on the political question. Since the regional political parties are important means in the realization of the goals and ideals connected with regionalism, political parties in the different states of the North-East are analyzed and studied.

The brief final part of the book is a kind of projection into the future. It consists of two contributions, one by the editor himself on "Nationality Question in the Hill Areas of North-East India", and the other by B. Datta Ray with some observations with implications for the future.

A lacuna of the volume, in my view, is that it does not contain anything much on the religious component of the regional question. The mosaic of North-East India is such also in terms of religious affiliations, given the presence of tribal religions, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. In what relationship does the religious affiliation affect the regional question would have constituted an important point of enquiry. This notwithstanding the book is very commendable for its analysis and the enlightening perspectives it opens up for the understanding of the issue of regionalism in North-East India.

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